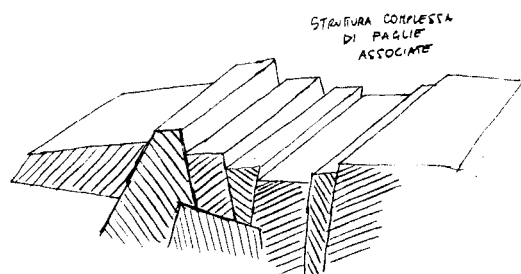


# SIC

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR COMMUNISATION



**Sic no. 2**

*January 2014*

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# This is not an Editorial

*The quest for an editorial having proved utopian due to tight time limits and the never-ending surfacing of more or less serious disagreements, these preliminary remarks only express the views of the author as modified and enriched by other participants' remarks—which should in principle happen with any text published in Sic.*

Crisis has become a household word and the attack on the value of labour power an everyday reality. Such an attack had already been stamped on capitalism's genetic code by the restructuring of the 70s and 80's, but the crisis of restructured capitalism gave it an enormous impetus. From struggles of waged workers anxiously demanding to remain such and mobilisations of pensioners defending their survival, to the outburst of rage of the 'feral class' in developed countries, to violent workers' riots in the South-East Asian global factory, and all the way through to the Arab Spring and its aftermath, hard evidence of the continuing conflictuality of social reality forces even the most unrepentant end-of-history sopranos to refresh their repertoire. Admittedly, not everything bathes in perfection. But it would seem that there is good news too: nobody has to worry about where this world is going, it is a one-way street, just keep on going. Some changes in management personnel are graciously offered, the persons reciting the 'there is no alternative' mantra can always be renewed and even bear the socialist flavour. Of course, the remnants of a once optimistic citizenism keep formulating 'proposals'—ever

less far-reaching, ever more restrained—begging capitalism to mend its ways, but nobody seems to take these noble souls seriously enough, since they dispose of no high-placed interlocutor with a receptive ear. Still, there are struggles, outbursts, riots, serving as a reminder that class struggle is always there and that capital, today no less than yesterday, is a ‘moving contradiction’. Hand in hand with it, the critical theory of its demise is being produced: history in the making is also the making of theory.

Communisation is no longer being perceived as an exotic beast, and it even tends at times to become a fashionable word. Present-day struggles highlight the end of the classical workers’ movement, together with its ambition to take the supposedly good-by-nature core of the economy away from voracious capitalist predators and run it itself. It is almost obvious that the world of our days, matter and soul alike, is the world actually produced by and for capital; that, therefore, workers and their products would have never existed as such if capital had not called them into existence in the first place; that working people’s demands have nowadays become asystemic or, in other words, a scandal akin to high treason; that proletarians are forced to defend their condition against capital but, in this struggle, actions that hurt capital are also actions that tend to call into question the proletarian condition; that communism cannot possibly be conceived as a program to be realised, but only as the historical product of proletariat’s struggle against capital and, at the same token, against its own class belonging; etc., etc. All this is reassuringly easy to show, almost worryingly so in fact.

Logical obviousness is not the stuff reality is made of. The extreme segmentation of the proletariat in restructured capitalism can easily blur the distinction of who fights for what, and it is only a meagre consolation that the ultimate outcome cannot but be capital’s victory or destruction. On another score, we are no longer in the presence of a central confrontation between capital and labour amidst pre-capitalist or proto-capitalist social strata which might support or not support either of the protagonists. The whole of society has been taken over and reproduced by capital, and this means, among other things, that various middle strata, salaried or otherwise, cannot but be directly involved. In the really globalised

world of restructured capitalism unification is only achieved by the construction of differences whose interrelation is conducive to the desired unifying result—targets being adapted or reset as the actual configuration of forces takes form. Zoning among regions of the world and within each region and each country seems much less stable than what, at some point in time, appeared as a well arranged fractalisation of the world, with its inevitable glue of authoritarianism and slaughter. In a context of protracted crisis, proletarians strive for survival and various middle strata strive to avoid proletarianisation and marginalisation, while the interne-cine strife of various capitals tends to indefinitely hesitate between two ‘pure’ but equally impossible outcomes: maintaining the instant global mobility of capital while at the same time postponing the massive devalorisation needed for any sort of fresh start; falling back into the warm embrace of states or blocs of states ready to decisively weigh, via bombers, tanks, secret services and all the paraphernalia, on the ever-renewed game of the appropriation of globally produced surplus value. The ‘normality’ of restructured capitalism was pointing towards an unimpeded global fluidity of capital and a repressive management of national spaces through states whose only really national element would be the ideology of their repression of the internal enemy. Its crisis is pointing to the practical difficulty of achieving a moving equilibrium: wide masses produced by both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ capitalism as surplus population are showing no particular enthusiasm to disappear from the face of the earth, through a downward spiral of misery, just because capitalism tells them to oblige; numerous middle strata, from Egypt to the United States, are objecting to their squeezing by dominant capitals, being sometimes ready even to hit the streets; and, most importantly, in proletarian struggles the weakening or absence of mediation mechanisms is made manifest and the only dilemma posed seems to be outright confrontation or unconditional surrender.

The core of the capitalist powerhouse is exploitation of one class by another and, in this process, their reproduction as a class of exploiters and a class of exploited and the reproduction of the whole of capital’s society. Every cycle of struggles constructs the content of revolution



adequate to a historically produced class configuration, and also of the counter-revolution corresponding to it. A victorious counter-revolution concluding a cycle of struggles is also a restructuring in view of a new cycle of accumulation: there is no such thing as a set of 'objective conditions' getting 'ripe' and pronouncing a verdict which would just have to wait a bit for the formality of its execution. The stuff reality is made of is class struggle, but not in a supposedly pure form: if any 'purity' is to exist at all, it will have to be historically produced by this very class struggle, in ways that constitute a breach from the routine cycle of capital's reproduction. There is no linear development from present struggles to revolution, but present struggles, even through their limits and impossibilities, are the only anchor of the theory of communisation. The second issue of *Sic* is decisively focused on a critical appraisal of struggles of varying geographical locations and content; a discussion of communist measures may serve as a theoretical counterpoint; looking into the concept of conjuncture will deal with the necessary leap away from the internal causality chain of capital's reproduction.

*Sic* is an international theoretical project, not a homogeneous group. Differences of opinion are welcome and eagerly put to discussion: they should come as no surprise. However, a common ground does exist, and it does differentiate *Sic* from other currents. For example, a transhistorical and teleological understanding of class struggle, which turns its back on any periodisation of its content, will not be at home here; the conception of ever recurring proletarian assaults, identical to each other and with no actual history in between, belongs to those ready to interpret the possibly good one just like the others, with the only difference that it was successful instead of unsuccessful; the 'proposal' (whom to?) of models of society which would be 'better' than the existing one is none of our preoccupations; the faith in the demarcation and extension of a communist terrain, in a communist rodent diving into the capitalist cheese and gradually eating it away, is not ours.

Other than that, *Sic* is an open project. Openness is of course no panacea, and a helpful mutual explanation and understanding is not a specialty of the society we all are part of. A few months ago, the members

of the French theoretical group *Théorie Communiste* (TC) decided to withdraw from *Sic*. This development was particularly important, as the theoretical elaboration produced by TC had been the cornerstone for *Sic*'s constitution. However, life goes on, and the proof of the pudding is certainly in the eating: the ability of *Sic* to host a creative collective functioning and theoretical elaboration will be the only decisive criterion for the future of the project (apart from any more general developments, needless to say). Withdrawal from the table neither disproves the pudding nor absolves anyone of past and present sins. As history will not care to give any verdict on the matter, suffice it to say that we wish a constructive continuation to both TC and *Sic*.

T.H.



# From Sweden to Turkey

## *The Uneven Dynamics of the Era of Riots*

The social explosion in Turkey makes it imperative to examine more closely what is happening, what is being produced, what the new limits produced in the period we call *the era of riots* are and how these limits will be overcome. The combination of the events in Sweden and Turkey, their temporal encounter, confirms the existence of two dynamics of class struggle, which develop each with its own *relative* autonomy. We cannot overlook the fact that the anticipated encounter between these practices is not likely to be harmonious and that it will raise the issue of how two historically produced 'subjects', which in their current activity have no common horizon, relate to each other. The issue, however, from the perspective of the revolution, is *how*, on the basis of this anticipated encounter, the necessary overcoming of these subjects is produced, how their struggle is transformed into taking communist measures against capital, i.e. into a questioning of all social roles that constitute society, into *communisation*.

There is also a third dynamic: the revindictive movements for the wage that take place mainly in the periphery, which has been incorporated into an internationalised accumulation by historical neoliberalism, namely in China and Southeast Asia. The encounter of this dynamic with the other two is not evident yet. There is also a fourth dynamic which concerns the development of the contradictions in Latin American countries, which have managed to integrate resistance to neoliberalism into the state (Chile is a notable exception; the movement of the socially constructed category of 'the youth' falls more under the

dynamics of the riots). This fourth dynamic is currently even more independent, although it may become specifically relevant to us in Greece in the future. Below we discuss the first two of these four dynamics.

On the one hand we have the riots of the 'excluded'; on the other, from 2011 on, there has been a succession of riots whose most important element, in terms of composition, is that the so-called 'middle strata' are involved, and their 'democratic' discourse is constitutive for the movements produced. The riots of the excluded appear in countries which are high in the capitalist hierarchy. On the other hand, the riots that are dominated by the democratic horizon, which is politically constitutive for the middle strata and formative for the movements of the 'squares', take place mainly in countries in the second zone and the so called 'emerging economies'. The fact that a country which does not belong in these zones, Spain, is part of this grouping suggests that the crisis affirms the undermining of this stratification, which had already taken place over the course of this cycle of accumulation (from the crisis of the '70s up to about 2008). These dynamics have not yet come into play in the very core (USA–Germany). The *Occupy Wall Street* movement, although it gave its name to the second dynamic, only marginally fits in it: it was an activists' movement (Blockupy in Germany was of the same sort), not a mass movement, such as the movements in Spain, Greece, or the 'Arab Spring' and the current movement in Turkey.

Those who are radically excluded from the official circuit of surplus-value production (this is their way of being integrated into capitalist society: inclusion by exclusion) do not articulate any (political) discourse, their only language is looting and destructions. They do not demand anything because for them it is already given that demanding is meaningless (otherwise they would have had demands), they already know that the state is not going to bring about their integration, but it will try to manage them as a surplus population. As the crisis/restructuring which has unfolded since 2008 further scraps 'social expenditure', it is clear to them that this management becomes more and more repressive. In fact, they asphyxiate in a 'prison without bars' (when you cannot afford to leave your neighbourhood and you are constantly cornered by the police,

you are imprisoned). Within this 'prison', community relations cannot offer salvation from everyday misery and to an extent they enter the parallel exchange economy, petty crime, i.e. informal institutions which reproduce a cruel, oppressive hierarchy (not to mention the position of women). So by attacking their prison, by attacking all state institutions that define them as prisoners for life, they challenge, in their revolt, their social roles within that 'prison' they find themselves in.

The middle strata rebel because they are collapsing middle strata (Greece, Spain) or because they are not allowed to constitute themselves as such (Arab Spring) or because they are much more repressed and economically squeezed compared to the pre-crisis period (Turkey), something that involves not only their lower-than-what-it-'should'-be income, but also all other social relations, the commodification and enclosure of public spaces, gender, politics or politics-and-religion, which in the case of Arab countries are aspects of the same thing, race, etc. The question of the middle strata is an open theoretical question. Their very definition is fluid: The traditional definition of the middle strata included categories of small (property) owners of means of production and traditional individual professions (doctors, lawyers, etc.). Today, however, how can one define the middle strata? This social stratification is largely present within the waged and self-employed (i.e. employees who contribute part of their wage to the social security system) and it is based on one's position within the production process, their income, access to credit, etc. And subsequently, the masses of impoverished unemployed, the de facto poor youth and the precarious workers, push down the 'status' of what can be called middle strata, and reduce their political influence within the state.

These two dynamics, the riots of the excluded and the mass public space occupations movements, in which these fluid middle strata play a major role, intersected with each other in February 2012 in Greece (but in this case the middle strata were already collapsing). This intersection was the result of the particularities of Greece. One cannot ignore that before 'Syntagma 2011', 'December 2008' had taken place. The December 2008 riots, as the student riots in Chile and Canada, are

inscribed within the range of practices varying between these two dynamics. In these riots the 'youth' emerges as a socially constructed subject consisting of men and women who find all the doors closed, who are not going to climb the ladder of social mobility, but at the same time they do not find themselves structurally excluded like the 'troublemakers' of Stockholm and England.

The questions posed by the contemporisation of the era of riots, taking place in Sweden and Turkey, are important:

A) Will the state be able to build the consent of the proletariat in the countries of the first zone to a management that turns against the excluded? This tendency appears to be produced as the almost inevitable response to the contemporisation of this dynamic by the events in Sweden (the emergence of the EDL as well as the increase of the political influence of the UKIP in England are directly linked to this issue, an emergence that could not take place following the 2011 riots which were much more white). The riots in Sweden update *the crisis of the integration of the proletariat into the process of surplus-value production as a crisis of immigration*. The issue of a new type of fascism, orientated towards the creation of a 'European identity' and thus with an intrinsically racist content, is on the agenda.

B) What is the internal dynamic of the absorption of the 'middle strata' into the proletariat, not only as a situation but also as an activity? Is there a chance that the practices of the 'commune', of those who defend themselves in the squares and try to rescue their class belonging, meet with the destructive practices of the excluded? To date, the only such indications are the conflictive encounter in March 2006 in France during the anti-CPE movement, an event that is already outdated and took place *before* the crisis, and the 12 February 2012 events in Greece, an encounter that was nevertheless immersed in the confrontation around the 'memorandum' and could not endure following the defeat of its specific demand. What can be the outcome of the 'democratic movements' which, at least to date, cannot be incorporated into the state? These movements exhibit a certain 'communitarianism'. The latter's starting point is the defence of state property (nothing is 'common', whatever is not private is state property) which is to be used according to its definition, namely as an

element that underpins the reproduction of labour power. The squares or the parks are spaces of 'free' time. The fact that unemployment has been significantly increased by the crisis/restructuring allows for a significant number of people to be continuously present in such spaces during the movement. The fact that whoever has a job joins after work is not surprising; in the evening and at night many more people are present. What is important is that a 'common life in the occupation' is produced. The 'life in the occupation' is certainly an image from the future that surpasses the horizon of the movement. However, it cannot be substantialised as a generalised practice to the extent that the movement does not really question the structure that supports the distinction between public and private space, namely, in the last instance, the totality of capitalist relations. The 'community of struggle', the 'communist gestures' should not be underestimated because in their generalisation they are the positive horizon, but in the stage where we find ourselves today we are obliged to look for: on the one hand what hampers the movement and does not permit an effort to generalise these elements, and on the other hand which elements of its content are at the same time the causes of its ending. Participants in these movements, contrary to the riots of the excluded, consider it very important to *territorialise their presence* (something not unrelated to the significance of the rent form that the surplus-value produced in modern capitalism acquires; exploitation has a defining role in the form of class struggle). By 'occupying' they claim the right of their material existence as a subject facing the state, which they believed to be 'attentive' to their needs. It is not least important that the commune is being defended against the police mostly by a young, male and poor part of the proletariat, which is experienced in fighting the cops (the distinction of this role appeared in Turkey as well, although to a lesser extent compared to Egypt). Demands are being necessarily sought, so that something more concrete than 'democracy' can be brought to the assumed negotiation table (which participants cannot accept does not exist anymore, continuously calling the government to acknowledge its existence). This process, due to the government's refusal to negotiate anything, naturally ends up in the government itself being questioned. Since the composition of the movement is dominated by the middle strata, it necessarily



demands the stepping down of the government, and such a demand, given the absence of a 'party of the working class', implies that it is to be replaced by another government (one that would be able to support the existence and reproduction of the quality of life that they believe they deserve). This endogenous tendency does not find itself in contradiction with the communitarian characteristics of the occupations, which are nevertheless undermined as constitutive and formative elements of the movement when the political objective concretises itself. Egypt and Tunisia have illustrated that, indeed, the fall of the government marks the end of these movements. In reality though, what initially appeared as a victory proved to be a defeat, as new police states have been established and the restructuring advances as normal, with the scrapping of benefits, increases in food prices, etc. However, the movements in Egypt and Tunisia were not able to stand on their feet again, as their initial goal that corresponded to their unity was achieved. Turkey, the next landmark in this dynamic, which despite its differences belongs to the same schema, as a social movement has to face another aspect of the situation. The government's political power is larger compared to Egypt and Tunisia. The unity of the movement is based on the transformation of the state into a police state over the last years. The question is: can the middle strata be absorbed into the proletariat, as an activity that questions capital, if these movements do not end with their political victory (namely their actual defeat)? Their defeat, which passes through their political victory, necessarily brings existing divisions to the surface. Part of the movement tries to continue the revolt, which however ceases to have popular support (namely inter-class support, given that class is a relation not a category). Without the mass participation of the excluded and the poor, how can this process of revolt continue? Is that possible?

The movement in Turkey is still going on while this text is being written. Its particularity, added to the fact that it is an event of global significance, determines the point where we find ourselves. Here is where we are: in a revolt that broke out in yet another police state. *A revolt with little chance of 'victory' on the ground of its content and of such importance for precisely that reason.*

The practices of the 'commune' that have as their necessary horizon a better management of the bourgeois state, a horizon that in the end is called into question, encounter the revolts of the excluded in the fact that the latter ones do not even have the horizon of a 'victory'. The outcome of this encounter, that will be decided among other things by the interaction between the practices of the commune and the practices of everyday survival by those structurally excluded from the official circuit of surplus-value production, will decide to a large extent the outcome of the class struggle in the era of riots.

Woland/Blaumachen & friends, June 2013



# Communist Measures

## Thinking a Communist Horizon

Communisation is not a prophecy. It is not the declaration of some future or other. Communisation is nothing but a certain perspective on the class struggles taking place right now. The task is to conceive, starting from those struggles but proceeding beyond their limits and their contradictions, what a communist revolution could be today.

Thinking a communist horizon requires us to begin from the class relation as it is, that is, as it has been transformed by the period of restructuring; and to understand why that which was in the past the bearer of a communist vision cannot today play the same role, in any case in the same way.<sup>1</sup>

Up until the end of the '70s the proletariat were seen as the dominated class which, in order to bring about communism, only had to become dominant. Of course, there were many ways of conceiving that, and those various conceptions were often antagonistic towards each other. There were also approaches which wanted to break with this dominant conception, while all the same having to position themselves in relation to it.<sup>2</sup> And in the end that way of looking at things could not be

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<sup>1</sup> The ability to think a communist horizon is one of the things at stake within the struggles themselves. One only has to review the history of the last thirty years, a period during which the question of communism as good as vanished from the radar. This obliteration was not a coincidence; it was the direct consequence of a defeat, of the vanquishing of the contestation that took place in the '60s and '70s.

<sup>2</sup> There has been some controversy lately over the question of the novelty or otherwise of the theory of communisation, in which some play has been made

overcome, not because the ideas of the epoch were universally mistaken but simply because the reality of the times—the affirmation of a proletariat growing socially stronger—was obvious to everyone.

The debates which opposed revolution to reform, the immediacy of communism to the transitional period (which could precede or follow the victory of the proletariat) all belong to this shared paradigm. But it is just that which is put into question, dynamically, in the current moment.<sup>3</sup>

The disappearance of a strong affirmation of the class and the erosion of the workers' movement is the symptom of a major turning-point in the class struggle. Class-belonging no longer seems to be the basis of a shared identity or of a possible power, but seems rather, on the contrary, to be an element that is foreign to everyone's life: the hostile embodiment of the dominating power of capital.<sup>4</sup>

Certain theories have concluded that the notion of class struggle no longer works to characterise the revolt in today's world. The persistence of capitalist social relations and of all their determinations (value, for starters) is however the sign that the classes have certainly not disappeared. The theory of communisation does not, therefore, abandon the theory of classes, but thinks it in the era of the collapse of the workers' movement. To give an overview one could say that communisation advances three essential ideas: first, the immediacy of communism (that is, the absence of any period of transition at all); second, communism as means and end of struggle; and, lastly, the destruction of the class relation and therefore of the proletariat by the proletariat itself. It is on this last point that one has to place the emphasis in order to understand how

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of the fact that what is affirmed in that theory can already be found here and there in previous periods. But the question of novelty cannot be posed for each assertion taken separately, but only of the way in which those elements, perhaps already thought or expressed some time before, are brought into relation with one another and linked to the contemporary period.

<sup>3</sup> 'Dynamically' means that the survival of a few residual traces, not yet totally dissolved, of the old workers' movement is not a serious objection to the current thesis.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see 'What is Communisation?' *Sic* no. 1, of which this text is a sequel.

the theory of communisation links an element of the current class struggles (the end of the affirmation of the proletariat and the decline of workers' identity) to a conception of the revolution (the destruction of the class relation by the proletariat.) This vision, which is a little paradoxical, nevertheless turns out to be extremely fruitful if one wants to seek out within the current struggles that which, *starting from now*, could be the harbinger of the destruction of capitalist social relations. The revolution is the destruction of the class relation, which is immediately also the destruction of the proletariat—which is to say that the revolution is the activity of a proletariat in the course of its own self-abolition. And we can already observe, in today's class struggles, situations in which a proletariat which is striving to defend its condition is paradoxically driven to attack it. In this way the class struggle appears in its fundamental ambiguity, a reflection of nothing other than a contradiction internal to the capitalist social forms themselves: the class struggle can just as well be the recapitulation of class relations as their destruction. So—it is by linking these two ideas (that there are aspects of the current class struggle which drive workers to attack their own condition; and the vision of revolution as proletarian action consisting in proletarian self-destruction) that the theory of communisation proposes to think communism.

The role of theory is not to reveal to struggles what they 'are' in their heart of hearts.<sup>5</sup> The point is not to go about trying to 'raise consciousness'. Thinking revolution and communism is not a magic formula which would transform the current struggles into something they are not. The task is to link theoretically current struggles with the possible production of communism, while understanding that this is something that is at stake within struggles, and not a matter only for the future. Without thinking of revolution, the horizon of struggles is necessarily that of capital. In the course of an ambivalent class struggle, which is at the same time the renewal and the putting into question of the class relation,

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion in this text will often revolve around 'struggles'. This plural, which has a certain currency these days, is one of the things that shows the end of the period of the proletariat's affirmation. The struggles are so many different aspects of *the* class struggle which today one must grasp in its full heterogeneity.

the absence of a revolutionary horizon obviously contributes to the first pole, to the renewal of the class relation. This is reflected, in the struggle, in the persistence of mediations which express this renewal (union hierarchies, the media, spokespeople and negotiations, amongst others) or, when those mediations have given way in the face of the intensity of the struggle, by their decisive re-emergence at the moment of the *return to normality*.

Working out a theory of revolution and of communism is therefore an activity carried out on the basis of struggles and for the sake of those struggles. The success of such an activity is obviously not in any degree guaranteed. The generalisation of a contemporary theory of revolution—that is to say its existence beyond a restricted circle of theoreticians and militants—will not take place unless it is adequate enough to what, within struggles, might express the breakdown of the class relation. To the extent that this theory involves taking a stand within the matters at hand, it is necessarily a wager. A rational one, since it involves the production of a certain understanding of struggles by the struggles themselves; but a wager, nevertheless.

## Communism as a Process, Not an Alternative World

Communism is no more a prophecy than is communisation. To speak of communism in the present is an issue for the current struggles. That is why it is indispensable to seek out what, within them, could be the harbinger of communism—rather than dreaming about a state far off in the future which humanity might one day be able to attain. Or, to put it differently: what is essential for the reconstruction of a communist horizon is above all the discovery of the ways in which communism might be able to emerge from the present situation—rather than describing what communism might be as a worked-out form of organisation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We are not going to get into the controversy over whether or not communism could one day be described as ‘finished’ (even only relatively) or if it will never be anything other than the process of its production—for the simple reason

But speaking of communism in the present must not lead us into an error that has a certain currency nowadays, that of taking ourselves to be able to find, here and there in the interstices of capital's society, communism in gestation or even already part-realised. Communism cannot exist by itself in the current world, neither as an existential or a political choice nor as a way of life.<sup>7</sup>

One must, therefore, think communism in the present tense, but not as a present state of things. That is what the theory of communisation lets us do. In communisation, the production of communism and communism itself run together. Communisation is a struggle against capital by communism, that is to say that for it communism appears simultaneously as the means and the end. That is why a vision of the production of communism is for it a vision of communism itself, but communism grasped through the prism of its production. We can not respond to the question 'what is communism?' by describing its supposedly complete form but only by evoking the forms in which it could be produced.

That said, the theory of communisation does encounter certain difficulties. Since communism is the means of communisation, it is necessary that in a certain fashion it be brought into play from the beginning of the process; but at the same time we're maintaining that communisation is a process within which communism is produced in the course of a period which unfolds over time, and which takes time.

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that none of that changes anything. On the one hand it is unavoidable for us to conceive of communism as a stage to be achieved when the destruction of current social relations shall have become definitive; if we did not, we would hardly have any way of differentiating it from an existential choice within capitalism. But on the other hand, in the position we find ourselves in we cannot speak of communism any other way than as a process. There is no doubt that there is an essential difference between the period of the production of communism during the struggle against capital and the period in which capitalism has been destroyed; but we've got no theoretical tools to describe the second period other than vague abstractions.

<sup>7</sup> From which follows the critique of alternativism in general. See 'Reflections Concerning the Call', *Meeting* no. 2, reproduced in *Communization and its Discontents*, Ed. Benjamin Noys, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson



This question was resolved in the traditional Marxist conception by the notion of the 'period of transition'. The social form that was to be produced in the course of the revolution, and as its ultimate result, was not to be directly communism but an intermediary stage, socialism. Communisation breaks with the notion of the period of transition because communism is a means of the struggle itself. So for it communism is necessarily immediate, even if it remains only partial.

Communisation therefore takes on certain seemingly-paradoxical forms: simultaneously immediate and extended in time, simultaneously total and partial and so on. To be able to think communism, it is necessary to find an answer to these questions.

## The Notion of a Communist Measure

It is at this point that the notion of a 'communist measure'—an elementary form of the production of communism—comes in.

The production of communism is nothing but the multiplication and the generalisation of communist measures taken at this or that point in the course of the confrontation with capital; measures whose objective is precisely to make the enactment of communism a means of struggle.

Communism may not be immediate, but within the communist measure it seems to be so. Within the communist measure there are no stages. There, communism is already in play—even if it cannot be thought of as completely realised. The communist measure makes the gap between the immediacy of communism and the time that is required for its realisation disappear, without in the same moment abolishing the necessity of this time. And this conception lets us avoid thinking about communisation itself as an intermediary period between the present and a communist future.

The term 'measure' should not lead us into error.<sup>8</sup> A communist measure is not a prescription, a law, or an order. It does not install any rule

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<sup>8</sup> Instead of the expression 'communist measure' one could just as well have used 'communist initiative'.

which everyone would have to submit to. It does not decree a general and impersonal norm. The communist measure by definition implicates firstly those who carry it out. And it is not a declaration of intentions either, or at least it could never be just that. The communist measure is a deed. Getting off on the sound of your own voice proclaiming the abolition of value, of social class or of capitalism is not a communist measure. Sharing out resources seized from the enemy, or producing in common whatever the struggle against capital needs—that could be.

A communist measure is a collective measure, undertaken in a specific situation with the ways and means which the communist measure selects for itself. The forms of collective decision making which result in communist measures vary according to the measures: some imply a large number of people, others much fewer; some suppose the existence of means of coordination, others do not; some are the result of long collective discussions of whatever sort (general assemblies, various sorts of collective discussions in more or less diffuse groups) while others might be more spontaneous... What guarantees that the communist measure is not an authoritarian or hierarchical one is its content, and not the formal character of the decision which gave rise to it.

The communist measure is an example of the way the production of communism is organised. It is not direct democracy or self-organisation.<sup>9</sup>

Such a measure does not necessarily have authors, or in any case identifiable ones: communist measures which generalise can very well have been undertaken simultaneously, here and there, since they are, simply enough, possible solutions to a problem which poses itself everywhere,

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<sup>9</sup> There is no way of determining in advance the way in which communist measures are taken. It is by reference to its content as a communist measure that it is possible to assure oneself that it is not a way in which a domination, a hierarchy or an authority might be reestablished—and not by applying some democratic formalism or other to the decision-making process. And it is not 'self'-organisation, either. Self-organisation is certainly, in the current moment, necessary for the existence of struggles when they venture beyond the cramped times and forms of legalised and unionised struggles. But the communist measure is a break with self-organisation as such, since such a measure goes beyond partial struggles that have to organise themselves around their specific objectives.

that is to say, generally. Their origin thus rapidly becomes impossible to locate. Any body which arrogates to itself the power to prescribe communist measures for others, by that very act, instantly negates, the possibility that it can undertake a communist measure.

A communist measure is not, all by itself, communism. Communism is not achieved by one solitary measure, nor indeed by a single series of measures. But then again communism is nothing but the effect of a huge number of communist measures—the onset of which characterises the period of communisation—which fold themselves into each other and which ultimately succeed in giving to the overall organisation of the world an altogether different quality. There is not necessarily any kind of continuity; it is perfectly reasonable to anticipate both advances and disordering retreats before a tipping-point is reached when the rupture has become so profound that class society no longer possesses the means to keep itself going. Communism and class society are mutually exclusive. Before the tipping-point, communist measures are by their essence ephemeral: they exist only within the space of the struggle, and are snuffed out if they do not generalise themselves.<sup>10</sup> They are simply moments when overcoming is possible but not yet secured. The production of communism is not necessarily a story told all at once. One can perfectly well imagine that one day a communising dynamic will unleash itself, violently recomposing communist measures taken in the course of particularly radical and extended struggles, and that nevertheless this dynamic will be defeated. And that it will be reborn, later and elsewhere, and conclude by destroying class society.

Generalisation does not mean uniformity. There are many ways for a communist measure to extend itself. It can of course be a question of rallying to some or other existing communist initiative (dedicated to production in common or to coordination...) just as it can be one of the adoption, sometimes in an adapted form, of measures already put into practice elsewhere. Equally, the communist measure can easily install

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<sup>10</sup> Generalisation of communist measures corresponds in the first place to the generalisation of the struggles within which they were born and without which they cannot survive.

itself within practices, experiences, and solidarities which pre-exist it—while being at the same time a creative rupture with these inheritances in virtue of the potentiality which the generalisation of the production of communism can bring into being.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to understand the process whereby a communist measure generalises. If the communist measure generalises itself, it is because in a given situation it corresponds to whatever the situation demands, and it is thus one of the forms (perhaps not the only possible one) which respond to the necessities imposed by the situation (intense struggle against capital). The moment of communisation is a situation of chaotic confrontation during which proletarians undertake an incalculable number of initiatives in order to be able to carry out their struggle. If some of these initiatives extend themselves, it is because they correspond to a need which exceeds the different particular configurations of the confrontation underway. Choosing amongst the measures which generalise and the others takes place under the burden of a social relation—scollapsing beneath the blows of its own contradictions. And it is only at that level, the level of generalisation, that one can speak of measures ‘imposed by the very necessities of the struggle’,<sup>12</sup> or indeed of the revolution as ‘immediate necessity in a given situation’ undertaken by proletarians ‘constrained by their material conditions’.<sup>13</sup> It is in this respect that the theory of communisation is not deterministic and allows us to understand the production of communism as an activity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Such a potentiality expresses itself as much in the multiplication of material possibilities (with the destruction of the State and the seizure of the forces of capital) as in the sphere of representations and of the imaginary—all of which are in practice indivisible.

<sup>12</sup> *Sic* no. 1, ‘Editorial’.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Crisis and Communisation’, Peter Åström, *Sic* no. 1. In the production of the first issue of *Sic* a debate took place concerning whether or not Åström’s article employed formulas that were too deterministic. It is possible to find traces of this debate on pages 38 and 39 of the journal.

<sup>14</sup> This functioning is not specific to the period of communisation. All widespread forms of social activity, that is all those which traverse the social body, operate in the same way—in contrast to the centralising and unifying activity of hierarchical or state structures. The practices of contemporary struggles can already in this way extend and generalise themselves, to their own proper extent.

## Communist Measures and the Production of Communism

The communist measure is the positive aspect of a communism of which we theoretically only have a negative vision. Communism is the annihilation of all currently existing forms of domination and exploitation. Communism defines itself as a series of abolitions: abolition of value, of classes, of gender and race dominations and so on. Said otherwise, if it is true that our attempts to describe communism are restricted to weak definitions (we know what it is that communism abolishes, but we do not know what it will concretely resemble) we have however a positive vision of its production: the communist measure.

The communist character of a measure derives from its capacity to reinforce the struggle against capital while being the expression of its negation. It is, therefore, a definite and concrete way of putting into play the overcoming of exchange, money, value, the State, hierarchy, and race, class and gender distinctions—and so on. This list is presented in no particular order of priority because of the singular capacity of a communist measure to attack everything which makes up capitalist social relations. We know that communism is the overcoming of exchange, value and money; but we do not know how a world without exchange, value or money could function. We know that communism is the abolition of classes, but we do not know how a classless universalism could function. A communist measure does not answer such questions in an overarching or global way, but tries instead to respond to them where they develop, and in the framework of the necessity of struggle.

Thanks to the communist measure, we understand that communism is not something which is all that foreign to us. Communism rests, to a very significant extent, on very simple things many of which are already able to exist: sharing, co-operation, the absence of socially-distributed roles and functions, and immediate and direct social relations, for instance. However, something which exists on a secondary basis does not have the same significance, qualitatively speaking, as that which exists in its generality (one thinks for example of value, and of the way in which its nature was changed by the emergence of the capitalist mode of production). That is why the concept of generalisation is essential. No content

is communist in itself (even if, on the other hand, some can very well be anti-communist in themselves). The very same measure could be or could not be communist, according to its context: it is not communist if it remains isolated, but becomes so if it generalises. It is for that reason that it is necessary to understand that an isolated communist measure is not a communist measure, even if it is true that no communist measure is able to break all by itself its isolation; that cannot take place except by the enacting of *other* communist measures by *other* collectives.

Generalisation cannot by any means be the only guarantee of the communist character of a measure. A measure which does not generalise by one means or another, or anyway which does not resonate with other measures underway, cannot be communist. But at the same time it is of course perfectly possible that measures which are not communist at all generalise. One should obviously exclude, here, everything which is an initiative of the capitalist enemy, in the form of laws, prescriptions, orders or coercive state control. But on the side of the revolution itself the various contradictions, which result from the complex segmentation of the proletariat (the unity created in the struggle is always problematic and it can never be taken for granted) and from the often confused and contradictory setting for any particular struggle, can engender counter-revolutionary dynamics which have, nevertheless, the form of the revolution, that is, the form of measures which generalise.<sup>15</sup> To repeat oneself: no communist measure is communist in itself, and the communist character of a measure derives solely from its overall relationship with the struggle of which it is a part. Some measures long retain, during the chaotic and non-normative process of the insurrection, an ambiguous character. Equally, others which may have been communist at a certain moment can very well become counter-revolutionary in response to the deepening of certain problematics which emerge in proportion to the disintegration of the capitalist social relation. That is how the *revolution within the revolution* can reveal itself: by open combat between measures that are communist and those which are no longer.

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<sup>15</sup> For an uneasy and tormented presentation of these contradictions on the side of the revolution, see the articles of Bernard Lyon (*Meeting* and *Sic* no. 1).

Communist measures and insurrection cannot be separated. Communist measures are absolutely opposed to whatever, within the class struggle, enables the integration of the proletariat as a class belonging to capital. Such measures break with legality, with mediating institutions and with habitual, admissible forms of conflict. You can count on the State to react with the violence and the cruelty which is customary to it. Communist measures are a confrontation with the forces of repression, and in this case too victory can be won only by a dynamic of rapid generalisation.

So there is necessarily a limit point with the generalisation of communist measures, a quickly-achieved tipping point at which the objective of the struggle can no longer be the amelioration or the preservation of a certain condition within capital, but must instead become the destruction of the entirety of the capitalist world—which becomes in this moment, definitively, the enemy.<sup>16</sup> From that point onwards, amongst all the things which are necessary for the production of communism, there is confrontation with State forces vowed to the defence of the old world—then the total destruction of all state structures.

## Communist Measures and Activity

No-one consciously constructs communism in its totality. But communist measures are not undertaken unwittingly: the choice to have recourse to them within a struggle necessarily involves an awareness that they contribute to the destruction of capitalist social relations, and that

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<sup>16</sup> As we've seen since the beginning of this article, the class struggle is ambivalent. It is simultaneously a struggle within capitalism and a struggle which heralds its destruction, a struggle for the defence of a certain position within capitalism and a struggle against that condition. The proletariat, in its struggle, oscillates between its integration and its disintegration. The communist measure builds towards a break with that ambivalence, and makes the struggle of the proletariat a struggle against capital as a system; a struggle in the course of which the proletariat bit-by-bit dissolves itself. But it is only when communisation has already become somewhat overt that this dissolution can become obvious. It is not possible really to talk of anticapitalist or revolutionary struggle except from the moment when communism begins to be positively produced.

this destruction will come to be one of the objectives of the struggle. It is the case, of course, that there is no separation between the necessities of the struggle and the construction of communism. Communism is realised on the occasion of the struggle, and within its context. But the choice of a communist measure, considered in isolation, does not impose itself because the struggle has left no other way forward than to undertake it: communism is not what is left over when one can no longer do anything else.

Communism is produced: that means that it is not the effect of a pure act of will, nor the mere consequence of circumstances which make any other outcome impossible. Every communist measure is the effect of a particular will. This will does not at all need to take as its object the creation of communism in its most general sense, but only in its immediate aspect, local and useful for the struggle. So the universal adoption of the communist idea as a kind of general, abstract principle to be realised is not a necessary precondition for the concrete production of communism. On the other hand, the social activity of the production of communism has its own consciousness; that is to say that in a period of communisation, when communist measures are linking up and becoming widespread, the overall pattern of what is being established becomes obvious to everyone.

There are, of course, 'conditions' for the production of communism. There is a struggle, which is class struggle, expressing both the breakdown of the capitalist class relation and the possibility of its regeneration. At the same time included in the negation of capital's fundamental social forms (a negation which those very forms ceaselessly put into play), is the vision of the possibility of its own overcoming. The activity of the production of communism must nevertheless understand itself as an activity, that is as something which is not induced mechanically by its preconditions. There is no necessity within the struggle which imposes the production of communism, leaving no other option.

What makes it possible to make communism effective is activity. At the level of the single communist measure, this activity is necessarily encountered as will, consciousness, project (*collective* will, of course). But the generalisation of communist measures exceeds all will, because even while each measure taken individually is an action, the overall set of communist measures is beyond the grasp of the will of those who undertake them. The



more the activity intensifies, and the more it consists in the production of diverse and multivalent measures, the higher the probability will be that these measures will fulfill the necessities of the global production of communism.

What is more, since this activity really is an activity, it changes the conditions within which it develops. That is: the more that communism is produced, the more it increases the potential for its own production. That is all that is meant by the concept of a communising dynamic. The first communist measures which generalise themselves demonstrate through their generalisation itself that they can be means of struggle; but at the same time they open up possible routes towards the overcoming of the specificity and of the constraints of the struggle itself. Measures which undertake the sharing-out of resources seized from the enemy open the way towards measures which undertake the satisfaction of needs by communist means.<sup>17</sup> Measures involving local co-operation open the way towards co-operation on larger scales.

This indicates the great strategic importance of the first communist measures.<sup>18</sup> If they succeed in providing an adequate and prompt response to the problems which arise in a particular struggle, and if for that reason they are able to generalise, then a dynamic can be unleashed which makes of their expansion the motor of their ever-greater expansion. The role of communist theory, which devotes itself not to legislating what must be done but to making it possible to name that which has been done (that is, the undertaking of communist measures), is therefore considerable.

The big mistake would be to imagine any sort of mode of struggle as a 'communist measure'. Communist measures indisputably presuppose a depth and an extension of the class struggle beyond the ordinary extent achieved by the common run of struggles. Communist measures therefore

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<sup>17</sup> Needs themselves transformed by the struggle underway.

<sup>18</sup> 'Strategic' should not be taken to mean that there is a strategy for the extension and the generalisation of communist measures; such a strategy could not exist. 'Strategic' means here that the first measures must be as adequate as possible to a given situation, while at the same time being a concrete instance of the use of communism as a means of struggle.

only receive their significance within the framework of a communising dynamic which rapidly draws them beyond their timid beginnings.

By definition it is impossible to construct a model for the communist measure. But one can nevertheless offer a few hypotheses, so long as one properly understands their function. The point is not to realise a prophecy, but to clarify our current theoretical understanding of communism. Hypotheses concerning communist measures derive directly from the manner in which the current epoch enables us to conceive of communism. All conceptions of this sort are, like the era which has given birth to them, eminently mortal and destined to be overcome.

Likely to be communist, then, are measures taken, here or there, in order to seize means which can be used to satisfy the immediate needs of a struggle. Likely to be communist also are measures which participate in the insurrection without reproducing the forms, the schemas of the enemy. Likely to be communist are measures which aim to avoid the reproduction within the struggle of the divisions within the proletariat which result from its current atomisation. Likely to be communist are measures which try to eliminate the dominations of gender and of race. Likely to be communist are measures which aim to co-ordinate without hierarchy. Likely to be communist are measures which tend to strip from themselves, one way or another, all ideology which could lead to the re-establishment of classes. Likely to be communist are measures which eradicate all tendencies towards the recreation of communities which treat each other like strangers or enemies.

Léon de Mattis



# The Conjunction

## *A Concept Necessary to the Theory of Communisation*

There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous. (Lenin, ‘The First Stage of the First Revolution’)<sup>1</sup>

... That the revolution succeeded so quickly and—seemingly, at the first superficial glance—so radically, is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents*, *absolutely heterogeneous* class interests, *absolutely contrary* political and social strivings have *merged*, and in a strikingly ‘harmonious’ manner. (*Ibid.*)

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin, V. I., ‘Letters from Afar, First Letter, “The First Stage of the First Revolution”’, in *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 297–308 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lf afar/first.htm#v23pp64h-297>.

results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. (Engels, *Letter to Joseph Bloch*)<sup>2</sup>

A few citations and a little provocation in their signatures. But the chief provocation is theoretical in nature and defines the object of this text, which is to rework the concept of contradiction.

## Genesis of a Concept

Everything was simple: capital was the moving contradiction and this contradiction was the essence of everything. It had a simple and homogeneous form. It included everything, explained everything, but... like an avalanche, it sweeps up everything in its path.<sup>3</sup> The rest were appearances [*phénomènes*] and accidents, contingencies. Besides the economy, all other instances of the capitalist mode of production played minor roles, doing walk-on parts. The segmentation of the proletariat, the multiplicity of contradictions in which these segments were engaged—the contradiction between women and men, or again the other classes pulled into the struggle, all with their own objectives—were nothing but shadows cast on the wall of the cave by the substantial reality of class unity and of the becoming of capital, a reality and a unity always already real, always already unified. To posit this contradiction was, *ipso facto*, to grasp the process of its abolition and the production of its overcoming.

<sup>2</sup> 'Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg, London, September 21, 1890', in *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)* (Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 294–296 [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm).

<sup>3</sup> 'Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth.' Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 706.



Until the crisis of the end of the 1960s and the restructuring which ensued from it, capital as the moving contradiction was indeed the content of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. The production and confirmation, within this moving contradiction, of a working-class identity organised the cycle of struggles as a competition between two hegemonies, two managements, two modes of control of reproduction. It was also the content of the gender contradiction through women's struggle caught in the paradoxical situation of affirming feminine identity and simultaneously demanding independence and equality with men (on the basis of recognition of this identity).<sup>4</sup>

The present cycle of struggles had a double originality. Firstly, with respect to class struggle, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital was renewed, and this renewal itself—that is, the identity between the constitution and existence of the proletariat as class and its contradiction with capital—conferred upon it as its essential content. In its contradiction with capital, which defines it as a class, the proletariat is in contradiction to its own existence as a class. Secondly, with respect to the contradiction between women and men, their essential content and basic problem became the natural existence of the feminine body, of sex, and of sexuality. Demands for women's rights, independence, and equality, inextricable from the question of the body, produced and encountered their own limits in the fact of being woman. Not only are labour and population as productive force a problem for capital, but, in this phase of the capitalist mode of production characterised by the failure of programmatism, both have lost anything that could have been made into the content of a political demand or of an anti-capitalist self-affirmation. When work and the population become a problem in themselves, 'nature' is brought into question and will not remain natural for long. 'Being woman' becomes perplexing. Gender puts itself before sex.

Programmatism, as a historically specific theory and practice of the struggle of classes, was the overcoming of capital as the moving

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<sup>4</sup> To demand equality and the end of differences in the name of, and through the action of, a group which is defined as a particular one. Joan W. Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

contradiction through the *liberation* of work, the *affirmation* of the proletariat and the *emancipation* of women as mothers by nature and free workers. The resolution of the contradiction between women and men was evacuated towards an indefinite post-revolutionary future, through the configuration of the contradiction between classes, but equally through the configuration of the contradiction between women and men, since work remained, more than ever, the primary productive force.

Thus, the theory of communist revolution could for a long time be satisfied with the *one and only* contradiction between the proletariat and capital. Because this contradiction could be resolved by the victory of one term over the other, it was enough just to grasp it and state it in its *simple* and *homogenous form*, leaving aside the multiple, diverse, and immediate forms of its existence, by which it *distributes itself* in the multiple existences of the relation of exploitation (though it *only* exists in this distribution), and the multiple levels of forms of appearance in diverse instances of the mode of production, as accidental circumstances and mere appearances. The simple enunciation of this contradiction was adequate to account for the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production and the movement of its abolition. We did not need anything else.

The programmatist theorists of the conjuncture situated their reflections in the frame of this reality.

‘Such, and only such, is the view that can be taken by a politician who does not fear the truth, who soberly weighs the balance of social forces in the revolution, who appraises every “current situation” not only from the standpoint of all its present, current peculiarities, but also from the standpoint of the more fundamental motivations ...’, Lenin wrote in the *Letters from Afar*. We now have to write this sentence backwards: ‘not only from the standpoint of the more fundamental motivations, but also and above all taking all its present, current peculiarities into account.’ The question of the conjuncture existed before but it was just the husk and bursting envelope of the essential contradiction, revealing itself. The situation was separated into an invariant, substantial character, and particular historical circumstances, into the essential and the phenomenal, into

potentiality and actuality.<sup>5</sup> But nothing exists otherwise than in actuality and that which exists in actuality is the whole of the concrete or the real.

So there was the course of capital as the moving contradiction. We know Marx's definition, from the *Grundrisse*... it is insufficient.

As the moving contradiction, capital is the dynamic unity that the contradictions of classes and genders construct. The contradiction between women and men is itself other than the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. No surplus labour without labour, no labour without population as primary productive force.<sup>6</sup> Wherever there is exploitation, there is the construction of the categories woman and man and the *naturalisation* that is inherent to what is constructed; there, also, the

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<sup>5</sup> Within Being, Aristotle distinguished between the 'potentiality' that is its essential principle and the 'actuality' that is the present manifestation of this principle (between the two, 'form' intervenes.) Most contemporary theories of the capitalist mode of production and of class struggle are Aristotelian, that is, idealist. For such theories, the concept, that is, a *concrete in thought*, is for them a concrete part of the real, the existent, which can be separated into this nuclear conceptual matter (an oxymoron) and the mineral crust of circumstance. As in all idealisms, the process of thought and the concrete are assimilated and even confused.

<sup>6</sup> To start from (biological) reproduction and the specific place of women within this reproduction is to presuppose as a given what is the result of the social process. The point of departure is what makes this specific place a construction and a social differentiation, that is to say, the modes of production until today. Up until and including capital, where this becomes contradictory, the principal source of surplus labour is of course labour, which means the increase of population. The increase of population as a principal productive force is no more of a natural relation than any other relation of production. But to possess a uterus does not mean to 'make children'; to move from one to the other requires a social apparatus of appropriation, of the *mise-en-scène* of 'making children', an apparatus through which women exist. To possess a uterus is an anatomical *characteristic* and not already a *distinction*, but 'to make children' is a social distinction which transforms the anatomical *characteristic* into a *natural distinction*. It is typical of this social construction, of this apparatus of constraint, to constantly send back what is socially constructed, i.e. women, to biology. The necessary appropriation of surplus labour, a purely social phenomenon (surplus labour does not originate in a supposed over-productivity of labour) creates genders and the social relevance of their distinction in a way which is sexual and *naturalised*.



appropriation of all women by all men. The simultaneous and interdependent construction of the contradictions of genders and classes introduces the fissures of each category into the other. Inextricable, experience is always impure. But it is not enough to say that no experience and no subject is pure, as a mere observation; this 'impurity' must be felt out and constructed in its intimacy.

Men and women are born of surplus labour. Of the same surplus labour they are born in their distinction and their contradiction. The existence of surplus labour is the existence of two contradictions. Each contradiction has its condition in the other, but more still, that which makes it a contradiction, that is, a process that puts into question its own terms in their relation. Four elements, two contradictions, one dynamic: that of capital as the moving contradiction.

This correlated existence of two contradictions is no mere encounter or sum, but exists for each contradiction in its proper terms, in its 'language'.

The conflict between the proletariat and capital becomes a contradiction in the existence of labour as productive force (the contradiction between men and women which, in the terms of the relation, is the transformation of this conflictual relation into a contradiction): labour as the only measure and source of wealth transforms class struggle into a dynamic of the abolition of classes, which is capital as the moving contradiction.

The conflict between men and women becomes a contradiction in the existence of surplus labour and in its relation to necessary labour (the contradiction between classes which, in the terms of the relation, is the transformation of this conflictual relation into a contradiction): surplus labour and its relation to necessary labour transform the conflict between men and women into the dynamic of the abolition of being a woman and of being a man as conditions inherent to individuality. This also is capital as the moving contradiction. In other words, the population as primary productive force (the gender distinction) is abolished as a necessity by the contradiction between surplus labour and necessary labour. The revolution is not 'contingent on the abolition of gender', because

it is not by chance if these contradictions arrive together, entangled, in all revolutionary moments, if they confirm one another, or, more often, confront one another.

This redefinition of capital as the moving contradiction *indicated* the response to a question whose sole fault was to never have been posed. As soon as one considers capital, the moving contradiction, as the construction of two contradictions that, though correlated, remain distinct, it is possible to designate a revolutionary situation or crisis as a *conjuncture*. In a kind of misunderstanding, by responding to the question of capital as the moving contradiction, we indicated the presence of another question in our answer: that of the nature of its overcoming and not only the nature of its course.

Thus, the question is to be reformulated adequately:

(1) In part, we know that capital as the moving contradiction is a 'tension towards the abolition of the rule' but this tension alone does not explain the possibility or the necessity of the overcoming, nor what this overcoming is.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> By way of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, exploitation is *a process constantly in contradiction with its own reproduction*: the movement of exploitation is a contradiction for the social relations of production of which it is the content and the movement. Valorisation, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, is the mode in which labour exists socially. Defined by exploitation, the proletariat is in contradiction with the necessary social existence of labour as capital, that is, value autonomised which can only remain by valorising itself: *the fall of the rate of profit is the contradiction between classes*. The proletariat is constantly in contradiction with its own definition as a class: the necessity of its reproduction confronts it as *constantly necessary and always in excess*: that is what the tendency of the rate of profit to fall means, the contradiction between surplus labour and necessary labour (which becomes the contradiction of necessary labour itself). Exploitation is this peculiar game, always won by the same player (because it is subsumption), but at the same time, and for the same reason, *it is a game in contradiction with its own rules, and a tension towards the abolition of these rules*. The object as totality, the capitalist mode of production, is *in contradiction with itself in the contradiction of its elements* because for these elements each contradiction with the other is a contradiction with itself, insofar as the other is *its* other. In the contradiction that exploitation is, its asymmetry alone gives the overcoming. *When we say that exploitation is a contradiction for itself we define the*

(2) In part, we know that the step that class struggle and the women's struggle must take (with respect to class belonging and the distinction of the genders as an external constraint) is precisely the content of what makes up the overcoming, but this content does not tell us how the 'tension' becomes an effective, efficient reality within this content.

(3) Finally, we know that if we are able to speak of revolution as communism in the present tense, it is because the present class struggle contains, within itself, the production of class belonging as an external constraint: it contains rifts:<sup>8</sup> 'Currently, the revolution is predicated on the supersession of a constitutive contradiction of the class struggle: for the proletariat, being a class is the obstacle that its struggle as a class must get beyond / abolish' ('The Present Moment', *Sic* no. 1). The present cycle of struggles had a double originality. Firstly, with respect to class struggle, the renewal of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital—that is, the identity between the constitution and existence of the proletariat as class and its contradiction with capital—was conferred upon it as its essential content. In its contradiction with capital, which defines it as a class, the proletariat is in contradiction to its own existence as a class. Secondly, with respect to the contradiction between women and men, their essential content and basic problem became the natural existence of the feminine body, of sex, and of sexuality. Demands for women's rights, independence, and equality, inextricable from the question of the body, produced and encountered their own limits in the fact of being woman. Not only are labour and population as productive force a problem for capital, but, in this phase of the capitalist mode of production characterised by the failure of programmatism, both have lost anything that could have been made into the content of a political demand or of a self-affirmation against capital. When work and the population

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*situation and the revolutionary activity of the proletariat.*

<sup>8</sup> To act as a class means, today, to lack any horizon beyond capital and the categories of its reproduction, and, for the same reason, to be in contradiction with the reproduction of one's own class, to question this reproduction. We call the situations and practices that experience this duality 'rifts'.

as primary productive force become a problem in themselves, nature is brought into question and will not remain natural for long. Being woman becomes perplexing. Gender puts itself before sex.

After the first two propositions, the concept of conjuncture follows immediately from this third.

Not only is revolution not the result of an overgrowth of the power of the class, the victory and affirmation of its place in the capitalist mode of production, but, moreover, the content of this qualitative leap is to turn against that which produces it. This turn against is the overthrow of the hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production that is the mechanic of its self-presupposition. The causalities and *normal* order of these instances (economy, gender relations, justice, politics, ideology...), which concur in its reproduction under normal conditions, is undermined.

The theory of revolution as communisation is not a prediction, but it is the present class belonging as the limit of struggling as a class, and the present contradiction between men and women, which puts their very definition into question. Therefore, it renders a certain theoretical paradigm obsolete: that of the simple and homogenous contradiction which resolves itself in the victory of one of its terms.

Under the shock of the redefinition of capital as the moving contradiction, these three responses produce a new question. How can the contradictory structure of the capitalist mode of production, this 'tension towards the abolition of the rule', transform itself into a revolutionary situation? Obviously the question is not to know when and where such a thing will occur: it is to know the nature of this transformation; not what will produce it—this has already been defined as 'the tension towards the abolition of its own rule', that is, capital's game as the moving contradiction—but the *nature of what will be produced*.

## Conjuncture and the Unity of the Dynamic of Capital as Contradiction in Process

The nature of what is produced is a *conjuncture*, a *present moment*. That is, this situation *that characterises periods of crisis*, in which the movement of capital as the moving contradiction is no longer a single contradiction (between classes), nor even the simple, homogenous unity of two contradictions (between classes, between genders), but the moment where capital as the moving contradiction no longer imposes itself as the meaning, always already present, of every one of its forms of appearance.<sup>9</sup>

*The Contradiction* of capital as the moving contradiction, a dynamic unity of the contradictions of classes and of genders is *one* and *essential*, but already in its definition, its construction indicates that, in its *historical efficacy*, it can only exist in its *forms of manifestation*. None of its forms, political, juridical, diplomatic relations, ideological, etc., none of the forms of relations between the functional instances of capital (industrial, financial, commercial), none of the particular forms of its effect on each part of the proletariat and on the assignation of gender, by which this contradiction refracts itself on every level of the mode of production—refractions that are the very condition of its existence—none of these forms are pure phenomena without which *The Contradiction* could exist just as well. The immediately existent conditions are its conditions of existence. It does not produce its own overcoming, its negation, the ‘negation of the negation’ of excessive renown, as ‘ineluctable as the laws of nature’ (and of dialectics), as if it *ought to be* simply because the *The Contradiction* is posed. The dynamic of the contradictions of classes and of genders becomes a revolutionary situation in all of the forms in which it actually exists and in their combination at a given moment, in a *conjuncture*. Otherwise, it is only a concept.

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that capital as a contradiction in process is the basis of any capacity of capital to be a counter-revolution. Indeed, it is on this ground that the capitalist mode of production, as a contradiction to value in its own perpetuation, is the adequate answer to a revolutionary practice.

All of the forms of existence of this moving contradiction should be grasped as its own conditions of existence, in which alone it exists. It is nothing other than the totality of its attributes. Its essence is its own existence.

At stake now is our understanding not only of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, but also of capital in its *historical efficacy* as a contradiction in process. Not only do 'classical' formalisations of capital as the moving contradiction limit themselves to the theory of class struggle, but they propose to dissolve all the forms of appearance in an essential inner unity. In fact, these formalisations are unable to comprehend these forms as *forms of appearance* of this inner essence (as if one could speak of capital without competition, of value without market price). 'The advantage of my dialectic is that I say everything little by little—and when [my critics, author's note] think I'm at the end, and hasten to refute me, they do nothing more than display their foolishness' (Marx to Engels, June 27th, 1867).<sup>10</sup>

The fundamental contradictory process is active in all contradictions within the forms of appearance, and it would be absurd and *idealist* to claim that these contradictions and their fusion in a conjuncture which is a *unity of rupture* are just its *pure phenomenon*. All these contradictions merge into a unity. In this fusion—in the revolutionary rupture—they constitute this unity *on the basis of what is specific to each of them*, on the basis of their own efficacy. In constituting this unity, they reconstitute and accomplish the fundamental unity that animates them, but in this process they also indicate the nature of this contradiction, which is inseparable from society as a whole, inseparable from the formal conditions of its existence. This unity is internally affected by these conditions

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<sup>10</sup> Translator's footnote: This quotation is taken from Althusser's citation of this letter in his *Reading Capital*. But, in fact, the actual quote is a bit different, and goes like this: 'Now if I wished to refute all such objections in advance, I should spoil the whole dialectical method of exposition. On the contrary, the good thing about this method is that it is constantly setting traps for those fellows which will provoke them into an untimely display of their idiocy.' 'Marx To Engels In Manchester, London, 27 June 1867', in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), p. 389.

which are its conditions of existence, that is, more immediately, the *existent conditions*. That this unity is internally affected always implies that it is a hierarchised structure (and not just a collection across which a single principle would diffuse itself, homogenously and always the same—nature in Egypt, politics in Greece, law in Rome, religion in the Middle Ages, economy in modern and contemporary times, etc.) with a determinant, sometimes also dominant instance,<sup>11</sup> dominant instances which are designated by the latter, in hierarchical permutations, etc. The *unity* of the contradiction exists only in this hierarchy, in the dominant and/or determinant character of one or another level of the mode of production, in the designation of the other dominant instances.

It is impossible to reduce this complexity and multiplicity to the simple and unitary, as if to an origin, or as if from appearance to truth (here we are at the antipode of the Hegelian model of development: there is no original, simple unity). The conjuncture always has a dominant instance by which it finds unity in its very complexity and multiplicity. In the course of class struggle, according to the momentary results which need to be overcome, according to the shifting aspects of power relations, and according to the ‘gains’ through which communisation ossifies, this dominant instance changes. The contradictions reposition themselves within the totality. Thus, to break up the existing order, what might momentarily be the nodal point must be attacked. But though the dominant instances are in constant permutation (political, economic, ideological, polarisation of the contradictions on some specific struggle or some specific part of the proletariat), the conjuncture is by no means a mere pluralism of determinations, indifferent to one another, stacked together.

This mutual conditioning of the existence of contradictions is not purely circular; it does not efface the totality as a structure with a determinant, crumpling into a facile, additive eclecticism or an *undifferentiated* inter-construction. This conditioning is, within the very reality of the conditions of existence of each contradiction, the manifestation of this structure with a determinant (that is the main difference between our

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<sup>11</sup> It all depends on the modalities of extraction of surplus labour in each mode of production: see Marx, *Manuscripts 1861–1863*.

theory and that of the Hegelian totality) which makes up the unity of the whole. Thus it is theoretically possible to speak of 'conditions' without falling into the empiricism or irrationality of the 'it's so' and of 'chance'. Conditions are the real (concrete, actual) existence of the contradictions that constitute the whole because their role is assigned by the contradiction in its essential sense. In this role, these conditions are not mere appearances beside the contradiction in its essential sense, as if the contradiction could just as well exist without them, because they are the very conditions of its existence. When we speak of the conditions of existence, we speak of the *existent conditions*.

If the forms of appearance and essence do not coincide, it is because *it belongs to the nature of the structure of the whole to be its effects* (the laws of capital must be competition between capitals, value must be price, surplus-value must be profit, the gender distinction must be nature, etc.). The relation between the appearances and the concept is not limited to a difference between diversity and generality or abstraction, but is also one between mystification and comprehension. The concept, says Marx in his 1857 *Introduction (Grundrisse)*, is elaborated 'starting from the immediate point of view and from the representation', but 'the concrete totality as a thought totality, as a mental representation of the concrete, is in fact a product of thought, of conception'. Essence does not correspond immediately to its appearance, a disordered opposition of terms between which the relations appear contingent. Nonetheless, essence is in this disorder, and nowhere else.

There is a surface of capitalist society, but it is a surface without depth. The essence is in this surface alone, even though it does not correspond to it, because the effects of the structure of the whole (the mode of production) can only be the existence of the structure if they invert it through their effects. Here we encounter *the reality of ideology*; it does not occult the structure: it is a necessary development of it.

Essence is neither a real thing (really existing and particularised), nor a simple word. It is a constitutive relation. Surplus value is not an idea or an abstraction under which specific differences can be arranged, and thus the reality, which resides in these specific objects (rent, profit, interest).



Nor is it a universal abstracted from the primary reality of the specific forms. Essence is not what exists ideally in each specific form or what allows the external classification of these specific forms—in that case, ideology would be nothing more than a deformed reflection of this essence. The relations are essential (including the objective and effective illusion); active relations that the specific forms establish between themselves, which define what they have in common: the essence. Essence does not replace the various and finite beings by absorbing them into some kind of exterior unity, or by negating them in favour of their ‘inner truth’.

## Conjuncture: A Mechanics of the Crisis of the Self-Presupposition of Capital

Conjuncture, then, is not an encounter between the two contradictions we have presented. There is no encounter; they are always already joint. Conjuncture is, instead, the multiplicity of the forms of appearance of this unity on every level of the mode of production, and, more precisely, the crystallisation of multiple contradictions in a single instance of the mode of production, which the multiple contradictions designate (momentarily) as dominant.<sup>12</sup> In this crystallisation, the conjuncture is also a *unity of rupture*.

Conjuncture is simultaneously *encounter* and *undoing*. It is the *undoing* of the social totality that, until then, united all the instances of a social formation (political, economic, social, cultural, ideological); it is the undoing of the reproduction of the contradictions that form the unity of this totality. Hence the aleatory aspect, the presence of encounters, the quality of an *event*, in a conjuncture: *a disentangling which produces and recognises itself in the accidental aspect of specific practices*. To such a moment belongs the power to make of ‘what is’ more than what it

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<sup>12</sup> ‘This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the *chief part* [our emphasis].’ *Capital Vol I* (Penguin, 1976), p. 176 (Chapter 1, footnote 35).

contains, of *creating* outside of the mechanistic sequences of the causality or the teleology of finalism.

A conjuncture is also an *encounter* between contradictions that each had their own course and their own temporality, between which the only relations were interactions: workers' struggles, student movements, women's movements, political conflicts within the state, conflicts within the capitalist class, the global trajectory of capital, reproduction of this trajectory in a single nation, ideologies in which individuals carry out their struggles. The conjuncture is the moment of the multiple crash of these contradictions, but this multiple crash *sets and acquires its form* according to a dominant determination designated by the crisis which unfolds in the relations of production, in the modalities of exploitation. The conjuncture is a crisis of the self-reproductive determination of the relations of production that defines itself by an established and fixed hierarchisation of the instances of the mode of production.

A theory of conjuncture is a theory of revolution, which takes seriously the fact that 'the solitary hour of "determination in the final instance"—the economy—never sounds' (Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*).<sup>13</sup> All the instances that compose a mode of production do not follow the same rhythm; these instances occupy an area of the global structure of the mode of production, which ensures their status and efficacy through the specific place assigned to one of these instances (neither monadic, nor a significant totality). It happens to be the case that in the capitalist mode of production, the economy is both the determinant and dominant instance, which was not the case in other modes.<sup>14</sup> A conjuncture is a crisis in this assignation, and can therefore be a *variation of the dominant instance* (political, ideological, diplomatic relations) within the global structure of the mode of production, on the basis of the determination by the relations of production.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Translator's footnote: The actual quote from Althusser is slightly different, and reads like this: 'From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes.' Trans. Ben Brewster (Vintage, 2005), p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> See the Marx quote in footnote no 9.

<sup>15</sup> For example the Paris Commune of 1871 or the seizure of the Tuileries [August 10th, 1792, TN].

In the crisis of reproduction, this displacement of the *dominants* and *determinants* across instances is the *how*, the mechanism, of the tension towards the abolition of the rule, through which the actual questioning of class belonging and gender assignation take place. Thus, capital as the moving contradiction is no longer the simple and homogenous automatism which always resolves itself into itself. When unity is undone (from the relations of production which are its determination), the assignation of all the instances of the mode of production enters into a crisis. The dominant instance shifts, from then on, according to a kind of game in which nothing is fixed: the *bomb* is passed from hand to hand. A conjuncture is the effectivity of the game which abolishes its own rule.

The conjuncture is a moment of crisis that upsets the hierarchy of instances—the hierarchy which fixed for each instance its essence and role, and defined the unequivocal meaning of their relations. Now roles are exchanged ‘according to circumstances’. The ‘determinant contradiction in the last instance’ can not be identified with the *role* of the dominant contradiction. One or another ‘aspect’ (forces of production, economy, practice...) cannot eternally be assimilated to the main *role*, and another ‘aspect’ (relations of production, politics, ideology, theory) to the secondary *role*. The determination in the last instance by the economy exercises itself, in real history, in the permutations of the primary role *along with* economics, politics, ideology (it would be necessary to demonstrate that this is already contained in the definition of the economy itself within the capitalist mode of production).<sup>16</sup>

This rigidity of the hierarchy among the instances of the capitalist mode of production constructs a linear time, a causal connection which progressively creates a link between the events in a purely quantitative

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<sup>16</sup> Criticising capitalist social relations as economy takes their autonomisation as economy at face value. A certain social relation, capital, presents itself as an object, and this object presents itself as the presupposition of the reproduction of the social relation. The critique of the concept of economy, which in this concept includes its conditions of existence, does not manage to pose the overcoming of the economy as an opposition to the economy, because the reality of economy (its *raison d'être*) is exterior to it. The economy is an attribute of the relation of exploitation.

temporality: it is the given, what simply is. But the time of the self-presupposition of capital also carries a crisis in itself, a moment of rupture in homogeneous time, the collapse of the hierarchy of instances and of economic determination, discontinuity of the historical process—a crisis which this temporality of the self-presupposition of capital holds in itself, a disruption in the hierarchised instances of the economic determinations, a discontinuity in the historical process: a conjuncture. The conjuncture is an exit from the repetitive—the narrow door, quickly closed, by which another world can arrive. The conjuncture is the conscious practice that it is *now* that this is played out, as much the heritage of the past as the construction of the future; it is a present, the moment of the *at present*.

## Conjuncture: A Necessary Concept

The concept of conjuncture is necessary to a theory of revolution as communisation. In fact, the revolution is not only a rupture, but also a rupture *against that which produces it*, which can also be expressed in the terms of the self-transformation of the subject, or again in the form Marx gives it in the *German Ideology*: ‘the class overthrowing it [the ruling class] can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages.’<sup>17</sup> The conjuncture is inherent to the revolution as communisation: self-transformation of proletarians. All the manifestations of social existence, that is, for each individual, the ‘conditions inherent to individuality’ (ibid.), leave their hierarchised relation within the mode of production and recombine—moving, as they create new situations—in their relation of determination and dominance. These manifestations thus become the object of contradictions and struggles in their specificity, and not as the effect and manifestation of a fundamental contradiction through which these manifestations would only be eliminated ‘in consequence’.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/germanideology/cho1d.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> This could be the family, as being of the city or the countryside.

When the struggle as a class is the limit of class struggle, the revolution becomes a struggle against that which produced it, the whole architecture of the mode of production, the distribution of its instances and of its levels are pulled into the overthrow of the normality/fatality of its reproduction defined by the determinative hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production. Only if the revolution is and accomplishes this overthrow can it be the moment when proletarians disburden themselves of the muck of ages which sticks to their skin, men and women of that which constitutes their individuality.<sup>19</sup> This is not the consequence, but the concrete movement of the revolution, in which all the instances of the mode of production (ideology, law, politics, nationality, economy, gender, etc.) can become, in turn, the dominant focalisation of the ensemble of the contradictions. If, as we say, the solitary hour of determination in the last instance—the economy—never sounds, this is because it is not in the nature of revolution to strike it. Changing circumstances and changing oneself coincide: this is revolution.<sup>20</sup>

We rediscover what makes the concept of conjuncture fundamentally necessary to the theory of revolution: the overthrow of the determinative hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production. A conjuncture designates the mechanism of crisis as a crisis of the self-presupposition

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<sup>19</sup> 'The conditions under which individuals have intercourse with each other, so long as the above-mentioned contradiction is absent, are conditions appertaining to their individuality, in no way external to them; conditions under which these definite individuals, living under definite relationships, can alone produce their material life and what is connected with it, are thus the conditions of their self-activity and are produced by this self-activity. The definite condition under which they produce, thus corresponds, as long as the contradiction has not yet appeared, to the reality of their conditioned nature, their one-sided existence, the one-sidedness of which only becomes evident when the contradiction enters on the scene and thus exists for the later individuals. Then this condition appears as an accidental fetter, and the consciousness that it is a fetter is imputed to the earlier age as well.' *The German Ideology*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/germanideology/cho1d.htm#d4>.

<sup>20</sup> 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.' *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis III, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

of capital, and the revolution as a produced overcoming of the preceding course of the class and gender contradictions, as a rupture against that which produced it.

The question of the unity of the proletariat, a question which is inherent to the revolution as communisation, is equally at stake in the concept of conjuncture.

The contradictions which oppose the middle classes, the unemployed and the precarious, the surplus masses of the periphery or the ghettos, the 'core' of the working class, the employed but constantly threatened workers, etc., to capital, to its reproduction, to exploitation, to austerity, to misery, etc., are not identical each to the next, and even less to the contradiction between women and men. The unity qua class of those who have nothing to live on but the sale of their labour power is something that the proletariat finds and confronts as objectified, against them, in capital; for themselves, this definition is only their separation. Equally, the capitalist class is not a unique and homogenous block, nor are the nations or regional groupings that structure the global trajectory of the valorisation of capital. It would be extremely simplifying to pretend that these two groups of contradictions (those internal to 'the haves' and those internal to 'the have-nots') do not interpenetrate each other, that the Brazilian proletarian is a stranger to the conflict between emergent capitalism in her country and the United States and the 'old centres of capital', that men against women could not equally be proletarians against capitalist exploitation.

The unity of the proletariat and its contradiction with capital was inherent to the revolution as affirmation of the proletariat, to its effort to erect itself as dominant class, generalising its condition (before abolishing it...), just as it was inherent to the liberation of women as women. The diffuse, segmented, shattered, corporate character of conflicts is the necessary lot of a contradiction between classes and of a contradiction between genders that situate themselves on the level of the reproduction of capital. A particular conflict, according to its characteristics, the conditions in which it unfolds, the period in which it appears, *whatever its position in the instances of the mode of production may be*, can find itself in

a position to polarise the whole of this conflictuality that up until then appeared irreducibly diverse and diffuse. This is the *conjuncture as unity of rupture*. What takes place at this point is that, in order to unite, the workers must break out of the wage relation by which capital ‘groups’ them, and if in order to become a revolutionary class, the proletariat must unite, it cannot do so otherwise than in destroying the conditions of its own existence as a class.

The dictatorship of the social movement of communisation is the process in which humanity as a whole is integrated into the vanishing proletariat. The strict delimitation of the proletariat with respect to the other layers, its struggle against all commodity production is at the same time a process that *constrains* the layers of the salaried petite bourgeoisie, of the ‘class of social management’ to join the communising class; thus, it is a definition, an exclusion, and, at the same time, a dividing line and an opening, the erasure of borders and the withering away of classes. This is no paradox, but the reality of the movement in which the proletariat defines itself in practice as the movement of the constitution of the human community, and in this movement the fixed and hierarchised relations that defined the reproduction of the mode of production, its self-presupposition, are undone. How can production be used as a weapon, if it is always what defines all the other forms and levels of relations between individuals, and if it itself exists as a particular sector of social life?

All contradictions are reconstructed, they unite in a *unity of rupture*. Revolutionary practice, communist measures, overthrow the hierarchy of the instances of the mode of production whose reproduction was the immanent meaning of each instance. Beyond this immanence—this self-presupposition that contains and necessitates the established hierarchy of instances—there is something aleatory, something of the event.

## Conjuncture and Event

The activity of class struggle is not simply a reflection of the conditions which constitute it.<sup>21</sup> It creates discrepancy: '... proletarian revolutions [*unlike bourgeois revolutions which 'storm more swiftly from success to success ... soon they have reached their zenith'*, A/N], like those of the nineteenth century, constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals – until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*' (Marx, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, part I).<sup>22</sup>

This could be the description of a conjuncture as matrix of the event, that is, of a situation that exceeds its causes, *that turns against them*. The event is the most immediate element, the atom of the conjuncture, it is when the conjuncture produces discontinuity and novelty. It cannot therefore be reduced to a simple moment in a serial, continuous process as the prolongation of its own causes: in revolutionary crises, revolutionaries are busy transforming themselves, themselves and things, creating something totally new, as Marx writes at the beginning of the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire*: 'The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.' The event goes against its causes: *hic Rhodus, hic salta*.

At the very beginning of *Wage Labour and Capital* (1849), Marx writes: 'The June conflict in Paris, the fall of Vienna, the tragi-comedy

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<sup>21</sup> Further down we will come to the role of subjectivity and of the action of the subject.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/cho1.htm>.



in Berlin in November 1848, the desperate efforts of Poland, Italy, and Hungary, the starvation of Ireland into submission—these were *the chief events in which* the European class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class *was summed up* [our emphasis] ... But now, after our readers have seen the class struggle of the year 1848 develop into *colossal political proportions*, it is time to examine more closely the economic conditions themselves upon which is founded the existence of the capitalist class and its class rule, as well as the slavery of the workers [our emphasis].<sup>23</sup>

However ambiguously, Marx poses here a difference between conjuncture and general abstract analysis—and, simultaneously, he poses the unity of the two. The conjuncture is the process of this ‘summary’ (‘the chief events in which ... the class struggle ... was summed up’), of this *concentration* in one place, or in one instance—here, politics—in one moment, in events.

The conjuncture is the mechanics, the intimate gears of the qualitative leap that breaks the repetition of the mode of production. The concept of conjuncture has therefore become necessary to the theory of the contradictions of classes and genders as a theory of revolution and communism.

## Revolution: Conjuncture and Ideology

Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, *ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out*. (Marx, 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, our emphasis)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/cho1.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-poleconomy/>

After exposing the broad articulations of what would become books II and III of *Capital*, Marx concludes a letter to Engels, dated April 30 1868, thus: 'At last we have arrived at the *forms of manifestation* [underlined in the text] which serve as the starting point in the vulgar conception: rent, coming from the land; profit (interest), from capital; wages, from labour [the well-known 'Trinity formula'—the fetishism specific to capital—presented at the end of Book III, A/N] ... Finally, since those 3 items (wages, rent, profit (interest)) constitute the sources of income of the 3 classes of landowners, capitalists and wage labourers, we have the *class struggle*, as the conclusion in which the movement and disintegration of the whole shit resolves itself.'<sup>25</sup> It is remarkable that Marx, in the architecture of *Capital*, should introduce the classes and the struggle of classes *on the basis of forms of manifestation*, after having consecrated thousands of pages to showing that these forms were not the essence, the concrete in thought, of the capitalist mode of production. Actually, these forms of manifestation are not simply phenomena which could be shoved aside to find, in the essence, the truth about what exists and about the right practice. We begin to understand Marx's strange turn of phrase: '*ideological* forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.'

Ideology is the way men (and women...) experience their relation to the conditions of their existence as something objective that confronts them as subjects. Reality appears as *presupposed* and as *presupposing*, that is to say, as *world*, as *object*, confronting the activity that, faced with the world, defines the subject. The main fault of all the materialisms criticised by Marx in his first thesis on Feuerbach is not simply a theoretical error; this fault is the expression of everyday life.<sup>26</sup> As we have said before, essence is nowhere else than on this surface, but it does not corre-

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preface.htm.

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68\\_04\\_30.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_04_30.htm).

<sup>26</sup> 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.' <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

spond to it, because the effects of the structure of the whole (the mode of production) cannot be the existence of the structure except on the condition that they invert it through their effects. This is the *reality of ideology*. 'The categories of bourgeois economy are forms of thought that have an objective truth insofar as they reflect real social relations.' (*Capital Vol 1*)<sup>27</sup> In short, ideology is everyday life.

This definition of ideology integrates ideologies which are usually grasped as intellectual problems. Even in this case, ideology is not a lure, a mask, a collection of falsehoods. It is well known that this kind of ideology is dependent on the social being, but this dependency implies its autonomisation; this is the paradoxical power of ideas. The theory of ideology is not a theory of 'class consciousness' but a class theory of consciousness. The division between material and intellectual labour traverses all class societies and all individuals; if ideology always exists in forms of abstraction and the universal, then it is by way of this division which, placing intellectual labour on the side of the dominant class, gives the product of this labour the form of the universal that is the garb of all class domination. The paradoxical power of ideas and their universality, this inversion of representations and their foundations, is parallel to the real inversion that presides over the organisation of production. The exploitation of the class of producers really turns the production of material life upside-down, within itself, in the production itself of material life. If it is true that 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life',<sup>28</sup> it is no less true that *life is what 'makes believe' that it is consciousness*. Bourgeois representations are ideologies, quite functional ones too, and they become perfectly real institutions. Justice, right, freedom, equality are ideologies, but heavily material when one finds oneself before a tribunal, in prison, or in a voting booth. The bourgeoisie, says the *Manifesto*, fashioned the world in its image, but then the image is the thing; the production of ideology participates in the production and the

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/cho1.htm#212>.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/cho1a.htm>.

conditions of material life. Representations are not a more or less well-fitting double for reality but are active instances of this reality which assure its reproduction *and permit its transformation*.

Ideology circulates everywhere in society. It is not just the appendage of a few specialised 'cutting-edge' activities. The relation of the exploited class to the process of production is also of an ideological nature; since this relation cannot be completely identical to that of the dominant class, it seems at first that these two ideologies would confront one another. And this is true to a certain extent. This 'second' ideology is critical, even subversive, but only insofar as it is the language of demand, of critique and of the affirmation of this class *in the mirror afforded by the dominant class*. Ideology is always the ideology of the dominant class because the particular interest of this class is the only particular interest that can *objectively* produce itself as universal.

In this sense ideology is not so much a deformed reflection of reality in consciousness as it is the ensemble of practical solutions, which resolve this separation of reality into object and subject, thus justifying and reinforcing it (see Marx, first thesis on Feuerbach). Ideological representations are effective because they reflect to individuals a realistic image and a credible explanation of what they are and what they are experiencing; they are constitutive of the reality of their struggles.

So, then, what about the revolutionary practice as communisation? It is the production of the new, not as the development or victory of a term which pre-exists the contradiction, nor as the reestablishment of a prior unity (negation of the negation), but as the determinate abolition of the old and, in this abolition, the abolition of the abolishing subject. If, at this last instant, the relationship of contradictory implication between proletariat and capital remains determinant, in these very particular circumstances (those of the conjuncture), the instances designated in turn as the locus of the dominant contradiction will always be constituted by ideology.

In its movement, in the forms it takes and leaves, the revolutionary struggle criticises itself. This struggle is, until the end, split between, on the one hand, that which remains an objective movement which is

not an illusion—the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production—and, on the other hand, within this objectivity, the practice of its abolition that disobjectifies this movement. For that reason, the struggle remains structurally ideological. It lives off the separation between object and subject. Because the dissolution of objectivity constitutes a *subject* in itself, a subject which considers itself as such, ideology (invention, freedom, project and projection) is inherent to its definition and its action.<sup>29</sup>

The revolutionary conjuncture is the internal transgression of the rules of the mode of production's reproduction, because these rules which direct the development of the capitalist mode of production have no finality *beyond that which they have for the agent interior to these rules*.<sup>30</sup> The rules which direct capitalism to its ruin do not produce some ideal that one should await fatalistically. They are a practical organisation of struggles according to the targets and stakes of the moving crystallisation of the dominants, of their relation and autonomy vis-à-vis the determination by the relations of production—this is a revolutionary conjuncture: a finality which produces itself and recognises itself in the accidental of such or such a practice, in the ideological practice of the proletariat as *subject*, as a term of the contradiction.

Without any previously developed objective basis, communism is a production caught in the contradiction of an objective relation whose

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<sup>29</sup> However, one must be very careful with the status conferred to this distinction between subject and object, none of which exists by itself or even through their reciprocity. In fact, the struggle of the proletariat and even the revolution are not the sudden emergence of a more or less free, more or less determined, subjectivity, but a moment of the capitalist mode of production's relation to itself—to see objectivism in this would be to forget that the proletariat is a class of the capitalist mode of production and that the latter is the struggle of classes. The question of the relation between the objective situation and subjectivity is raised in the self-contradiction of the capitalist mode of production. The subject and the object we speak of here are moments of this self-contradiction, which in its unity goes through these two opposed phases (a unity of moments destined for autonomy).

<sup>30</sup> It is as practice of the proletariat that the game abolishes its rule: '*When we say that exploitation is a contradiction for itself, we define the situation and the revolutionary activity of the proletariat.*' ('The Present Moment', *Sic* no. 1). See also footnote 5 above.

overcoming should produce itself as the conscious and voluntary formalisation of a project, because the process of revolution always rejects its present state as being its result. This project is an *ideological* one because it rejects its objective foundation in its present state as its *raison d'être*, and places the future, what *ought to be*, as the comprehension of the present and as practice, in the present moment. In the objectivity of the revolutionary process, communism is a project, the *ideological* form of combat in which it is carried through to the end.

## In Conclusion

When our Greek comrades present the events of the November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011 protest in Athens in their text 'Without You, Not a Single Cog Turns', this helps us come closer in a situation to what we call a conjuncture.

They present a situation which makes it possible to speak of programmatisation, workers' identity, class unity, asystematicity of the wage demand, communist measures, the cycle of struggles, and they do this all in an '*evental*' way.

This presentation grasps the movement of the burst of a situation into multiple contradictions, the conjunction in a 'present moment' of opposed and heterogeneous interests which are produced, specified and overcome in their confrontations—in a word, it is the very essence of what a *conjuncture* could be which is condensed in these three pages and grasped as such. Under the effect of the crisis and of the 'step to be taken' by class struggle, the contradiction between proletariat and capital as it is grasped *in its immediacy* is no longer the simple and homogenous contradiction that was our theoretical object; this contradiction has become the ensemble of its own determinations, of all its forms of appearance, including its political, ideological, juridical forms, which are not mere phenomena, but precisely that within which only it exists. All the classes and especially all the dynamics and functions that had been, up until then, kept as absorbed into a simple contradiction between the proletariat and capital are now revealed to themselves and to others. This heterogeneity of 'agents' and of projects, these conflicts, all are the conditions of existence of this contradiction. It becomes clear that even the economic

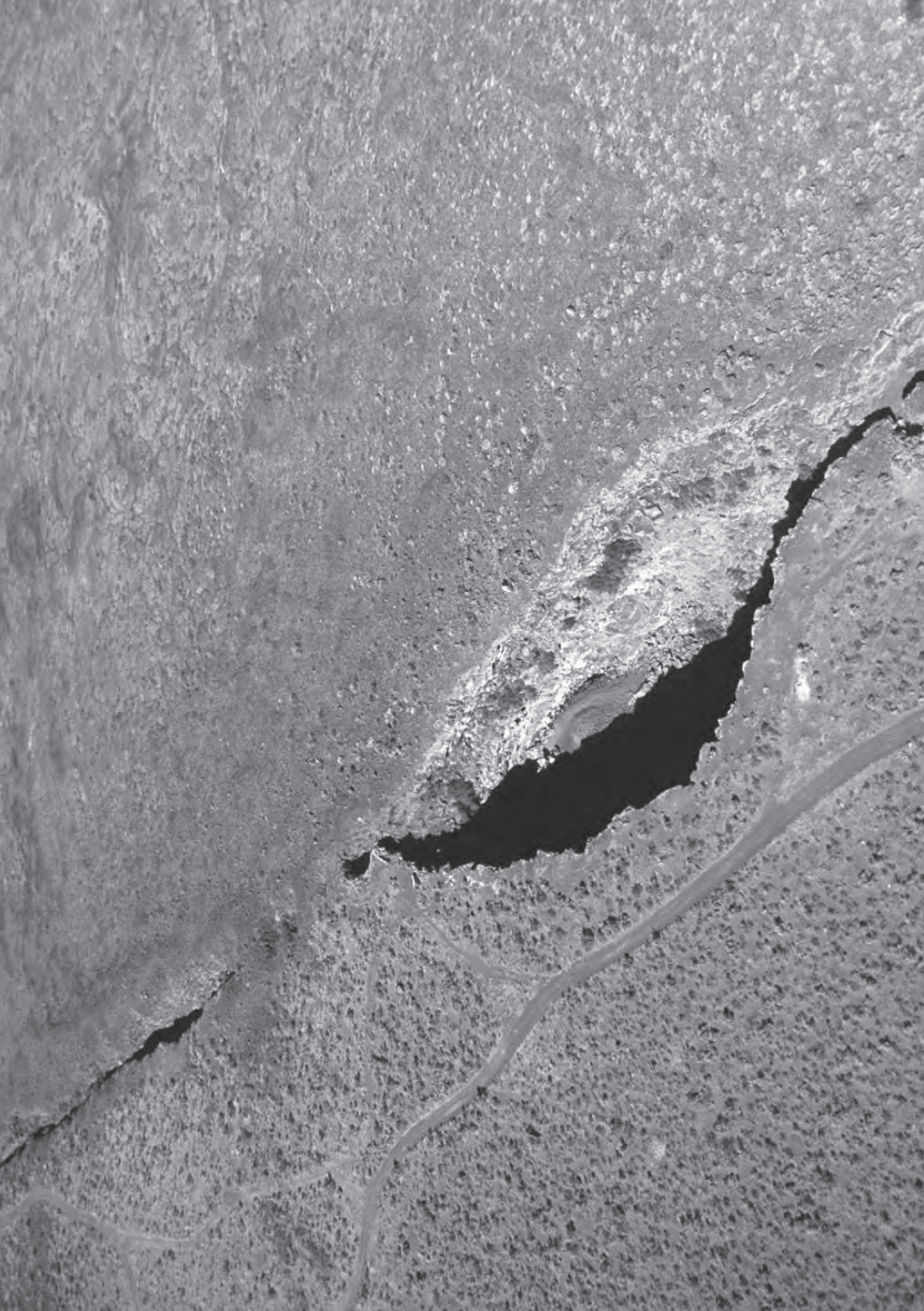
definition of the crisis and of the situation is determinant only in the measure in which it designates itself as political confrontations, as heterogeneity and conflicts in the struggle between proletariat and capital and within the proletariat itself. This economic determination imposes itself as effective in the course of history as politics and as ideology.

On the basis of a particular situation, of an event, these few pages sketch up what a conjuncture can be. Humorously, but without irony, one could say that they are as beautiful as Lenin's in the months preceeding October.

R.S.







# The Rise of the (Non-)Subject

A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of the hooded rioter. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: The British prime minister David Cameron and the General Secretary Aleka Papariga,<sup>1</sup> the Italian foreign secretary Roberto Maroni, Adonis and Takis Fotopoulos,<sup>2</sup> Italian COBAS and German police officers. (Πρακτορείο Rioters, 22 February 2012)<sup>3</sup>

The Sunday of 12 February was one of those historical moments when a capitalist society's contradictions meet in time and space, break out explosively and a new reality is produced. Class struggle renews its dynamic, and this new dynamic becomes its new internal limit that it must overcome. What matters is not the event itself (no single event alone matters decisively in terms of the revolution), but its role in the historical process of the (non-)subject's emergence in the current conjuncture.

Sunday's events were expected by everyone, in contrast to December 2008. In the past few months the whole of Europe waited for a social explosion appropriate to the situation in Greece. It was the obituary of a death everyone had known was coming. After several political manoeuvres, the media announced the date, Sunday 12 February (a perfect historical irony) and the designation; 'vote on Memorandum no. 2'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The General Secretary of the Communist Party of Greece.

<sup>2</sup> Adonis Georgiadis, MP of the far-right party LAOS and minister of Maritime Trade under the Papadimos coalition at the time of writing.

<sup>3</sup> <http://rioters.espivblogs.net/>.

<sup>4</sup> 12 February is the anniversary of the Varkiza Treaty, which initiated the second stage of the civil war in 1945. The Communist Party agreed to disarm the communist ELAS army, an act which enabled the subsequent persecution of communists by the gendarmerie and right-wing paramilitary groups.

Nobody did anything to stop it, nobody could do anything, despite how much they may have wanted to, as an article by a new ‘bitter friend’ of ‘contemporary Gavroches’ shows.<sup>5</sup> This explosion had the characteristics of the transitional period we are going through, the ‘era of riots’, and its content was the result of the impasse faced today by the structuring of capital in a world scale, while at the same time intensifying it (Greece is a condensed expression of the acuteness of this impasse).

Every significant event of the class struggle is immersed in the entirety of the historically-determined contradictions of a capitalist society’s present, and always appears in a specific form, fetishised and multiply mediated.<sup>6</sup> At the moment, in Greece, largely because of its very significant recent *political* history, this conflict necessarily takes the form of a political conflict (in complete contrast to August 2011 in London, for example, as the era of riots cannot be other than particularised in the local and historical specificities of each social formation). The state’s political announcement of the coming social explosion (or the first in a chain of explosions) amounted to its integration, as a ‘controlled detonation’, into the reproduction of capitalist society. This is a disciplinary, repressive integration, in the context of a state of emergency. This is integration ‘by exclusion’. After its victory, and the return to normality, the state was obliged to designate certain practices of the ‘hooded rioters’ as criminal, in order to temporarily manage the inescapable consequences of events. The state’s discourse is totalising, it prohibits any other opinion: *Nobody can be (or say that they are) on the side of the ‘hooded rioters’, let alone admit that they are one of them, and take a stand for the the ability to speak publicly*

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<sup>5</sup> The well-known leftist politician, Alekos Alavanos, wrote: ‘As long as the powers of the left remain alienated from the younger generation, as long as “overthrow” remains a tired stereotype and does not translate into a revolutionary plan and political conflict, these phenomena will become increasingly frequent and diffuse. If Gavroche of *Les Misérables* was at Syntagma last night, he wouldn’t be in the closed-off blocs of party youth; he would be burning banks and cinemas with his friends.’ [http://konserbokoyti.blogspot.com/2012/02/blog-post\\_2450.html](http://konserbokoyti.blogspot.com/2012/02/blog-post_2450.html).

<sup>6</sup> Also see the text ‘Without you, not a single cog turns...’ (this issue), where we discuss the political form in which the conflict between practices of different sections of the proletariat is expressed in Greece.

*about last Sunday's actions.*

'Resistance against the memorandum', as the whole situation was politely named, could not have been without the appearance of the current limit of trade unionism. The 48-hour general strike was indeed monumental, as it revealed in all its majesty the ultimate death of the labour movement: Nobody cared about it, not even those who receive a share of surplus value (real surplus value, capitalist profit) through the racket whose (up until now, formally recognised) sideline is to occasionally announce general strikes. Although tertiary union leaders are still exclusively *socially legitimised* to announce general strikes, they are nowhere to be seen, nonexistent. Promptly informed that unionism is a thing of the past, they are now looking for a new venture (possibly a good, if high risk, investment opportunity might be insurance protection against demonstrations, as newly proposed legislation requires organisers to pay for any damages). That the labour movement can no longer be seen among the forms and practices of a conflict in which the existence of a basic wage is itself at stake indicates the extent to which the wage demand is now excluded from capitalist reproduction. At the same time, this officially-absent labour character of the proletarian movement is important for the encounter between the impasse of demand struggles and the coming process of abolishing capitalist society. It is a conflictual encounter, a process of historical production.

On Sunday the crowd was massive, with an interclass composition, both among 'hooded rioters' and other protesters. This was manifested in the wide participation in clashes against the police and the almost universal acceptance of these clashes. Not a single person (nor their trade union representatives) could be found in the square that evening that would defend the police for their role. No 'peacekeepers' of the movement could be found this time, as last summer; the only person to defend them was the representative of the party of Order, the would-be prime minister<sup>7</sup>. The police, in general terms, is always the capitalist class in fighting

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<sup>7</sup> The president of the right-wing New Democracy party, Antonis Samaras, stated the next day: 'Those thugs should know that, when the time comes, I will take their hoods off.'

position against the proletariat. In this particular conjuncture, however, it is the material expression of a specific strategy of capital within the Greek social formation: for the second phase of the restructuring to be imposed, *the Greek state must lose its autonomy, it must now integrate organically within a wider coalition (the EU)* and be officially demoted within the internal hierarchy, with all that entails for capitalist competition and the fortunes of the petit bourgeois strata. Attacking the police is of course a necessary break towards overcoming the limits of 'dialogue' with the state in order to negotiate the price of labour power or any other 'right'. In the present moment, however, this could also be an expression of, among other things, the conflict between petit bourgeois strata and the state, which is driving them to the ground. As we have clearly seen in Egypt in 2011, attacking the repressive forces of the state does not necessarily entail questioning the most fundamental capitalist community, the nation,<sup>8</sup> or the real god, money, and property. This is why many former or new 'indignants' took part in clashes, and in many cases their combative practice was accompanied by respecting 'people's property' and by calling the police 'traitors', 'German-guards' or 'Turks', who 'should be with us and not against us'. Even in the midst of clashes, and particularly because of the unprecedented numbers that engaged in them, this Sunday could not but contain the strong 'national' and 'popular' element inevitably produced throughout the 'struggle against the memorandum'.

Beyond the interclass participation that was necessary for a mass confrontation with the police and the support it received, an important element of this Sunday, about which the state and all the champions of Culture went rabid, was the looting and burning of shops and other buildings.<sup>9</sup> The class struggle is a chain reaction that constitutes its own dynamics. This practice which had appeared on a massive scale

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<sup>8</sup> The nation as a concept registers the contradictory class unity of any given capitalist society. Through its ideological apparatuses, the state transforms, renders socially legitimate, the class interests of capital, presenting them and setting them to work as national interests. State, nation and capital are facets of a single class power: capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> The burning of Attikon cinema, one of Athens' historic buildings, caused outrage among several arts and culture personalities.



in December 2008, after abating in the fallout of the Marfin incident in May 2010, now returned.<sup>10</sup> The burning of buildings was also the result of the special political form that class struggle takes in Greece. On one hand, the police had to protect the parliament aggressively and push the main mass of demonstrators into the adjacent streets; on the other hand, the weight of political history does not allow the Greek state to further raise the level of repression and become blatantly dictatorial (banks or tanks) even now that the emergency situation is so serious. Throughout the period of restructured capitalism (in Greece it begins around 1996) the transformation of the police into an army of occupation in the urban environment is the element that has allowed the bourgeois state to remain democratic while severely repressing the active sections of the proletariat. Through the decade of 2000, traditional conflicts with police became impossible, to the extent that the police could not be warded off by the dynamic minorities who fought in the streets. So in the student movement of 2006–07, the rage of the young precarious proletariat who were repelled by the police was channelled against Athens buildings, and by 2008 every business owner realised that they had to increase spending on securing their properties from the raids of the dangerous classes. In the beginning of the EU-IMF memorandum period, the encounter of those practices with one of the last bursts of a sort of union movement resulted in the Marfin incident. Social violence was marginalised and repressed by all political formations for about a year. In the interclass movement of the squares, however, the question of violence re-emerged as an internal contradiction of the movement, as the new round of measures was even tougher and ‘the practices of riot’ surrounded the squares, culminating on 28–29 June 2011. It was then becoming evident that growing sections of the population tended to engage in clashes against the police.

The section of the proletariat that torches buildings and loots is a

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<sup>10</sup> When Marfin bank was firebombed by rioting protesters during the general strike, three workers, who had been forced to work hidden behind the shutters, died in the fire.

product of the neoliberal period, and particularly of the recent period that led to the crisis. All those who talked of incidents that only involved the social margins of France in November 2005, of ‘thugs who attack Paris student marches’ in March 2006; of a ‘metropolitan insurrection, one of those that go off every now and again but fizzle out like fireworks, while what really matters is the *labour movement*’ in December 2008, they all found it a little difficult when London exploded in August 2011. This section of the proletariat cannot stop the production process from the inside (at least not yet), so it acts at the level of the circulation of goods and services. *The emerging (non-)subject is simultaneously subject and non-subject, because of its historically-defined relation between integration and exclusion from the process of value production.* The crucial matter is not the production of a quantitative increase of the lumpen proletariat, but that of an increased lumpenisation of the proletariat—a lumpenisation that does not appear as external in relation to waged labour but as its defining element. Precarity, the constant ‘in-and-out’, produces a (non-)subject of the (non-)excluded, since inclusion increasingly tends to be by exclusion, especially for those who are young. It is a dynamic, a continually regenerated movement. We are not only referring to the radical exclusion from the labour market, but mainly to the exclusion from whatever is regarded as ‘normal’ work, a ‘normal’ wage, ‘normal’ living. In an environment that produces surplus populations and violent attacks on the historically-defined value of labour power, the much-anticipated ‘subject’ loses the ground beneath its feet. There is no ‘subject’ without a distinctly given ‘objectivity’ that allows it to lead the life of a subject. In the crisis of restructured capitalism the ground (anchoring on the wage relation) is lost together with the oxygen (the ability to demand better living standards). *The emerging (non-)subject appears simultaneously as a subject without objectivity and as a condensation of objectivity in the form of its dissolution.* Those who are already trapped in the precarity–exclusion continuum invaded a movement that still tends to invoke ‘normal’ employment and a ‘normal’ wage; and the (non-)subject’s invasion was successful, because the movement had already been invaded by capital’s continual bombardment on ‘normal’ employment and the ‘normal’ wage. This whole situation produces destructive practices as a rift within the

movement of the proletariat, pushing capital to intensify the repressive aspect of its reproduction as relation and to keep trying to raise the rate of exploitation further and more violently.

With Sunday's practices (the practices of riot) these particular sections of the proletariat are becoming, within the reproduction of capitalist society, an aggravating factor for the crisis. The (non-)subject's role reflects the revolution produced in this cycle of struggles, which is the abolition of all mediations of value, namely of all current social relations, and not the seizing of power by workers. The horizon of (this period's) revolution is not the revolutionary programme that awaits the arrival of the 'subject' that will inevitably have to play the central role. Productive workers, despite their special role, are not produced in this cycle of struggles as a separate revolutionary subject that will lead the process of transformation of capitalist society into a 'society of labour'; the core concern of the revolution will not be the 'management of production'. In future, the destructive practices that are emerging today will find their limit in their own reproduction and it will not be possible for them to only involve the destruction of constant capital as 'losses' or as temporary sabotage. In order to continue life within the struggle, practices will be transformed and will be forced to question the existence of the means of production *as means of the production of value*. This questioning will not be a monolithic process towards a supposed 'victory', but will encompass all the conflicts that will produce, as ruptures, the abolition of the distinction between production and reproduction, that is, the abolition of value and with it the abolition of all the social relations of capital. For the moment, within the crisis of restructured capitalism, the (non-)subject is by now becoming an active force. It continually reappears, and its practices tend to coexist 'antagonistically' with revindicative practices, while revindicative practices tend to 'emulate' the practices of riot, which unavoidably magnetise them, since 'social dialogue' has been abolished.

In September 2011 we wrote concerning that point in time: 'What will be important in future events, in terms of the crisis and the intensification of class struggle, is the unfolding of the relation between the kind of practices we saw in the UK [August 2011, A/N] and those of the "indignants". This relation becomes particularly important because



of the fluidity between these two forming subjects (unemployment has entered the core of the wage relation). The delineation of a new limit (the police, class belonging as an external constraint) leads to a new configuration that we are attempting to approach by the notion of “riots”. “Riots” surround the “indignants” movements, they encroach into them and eventually penetrate them, producing rifts among the practices of these movements (the first manifestation of this fact was on 28 – 29 June in Greece). The dialectic of the rift is working fervently...’. The Sunday events were an overcoming, in the sense that the practices have now met, they have come face to face in action. The encounter of these practices is a result of the dynamic produced by the co-penetration between the ‘indignants’, the ‘proletarianised petit bourgeois’, the civil servants, the youth, the precarious/unemployed. The dialectical movement of these practices is already in process. However, this dialectic will not develop in a vacuum; it is also immersed in the entire dynamic of the class struggle: ‘The four-hundred-euro wage is not related to the cuts in pharmacy profits, or to the benefit cuts in public enterprises and banks, or to pension cuts, or to the opening up of closed trades, or to anything that drives unionists and workers into occupations, demonstrations and long-term strikes. When all of the above have reached the kind of limits they claim, then what precisely could those who have no hope of survival do? The youths in run-down neighbourhoods who frequent the sports clubs owned by untaxed shipping magnates hate the centre of Athens and its pretty lights. The Capital’s young unemployed are desperate and prepared to resist becoming the lepers of the social margins. We talk to them about solidarity. Rubbish. Nobody is ready to make the smallest sacrifice ... so that the twenty-somethings of Greece can get a few Euros more.’<sup>11</sup> These practices belong to fluid and continually reconfigured subjects formed by today’s class struggle. In the context of every crisis where realised profit is not enough to breathe life into the immense mass of past crystallised labour, the more the proletariat is squeezed, it becomes all the more fragmented. In the present conjuncture, however, whose core contains the expulsion

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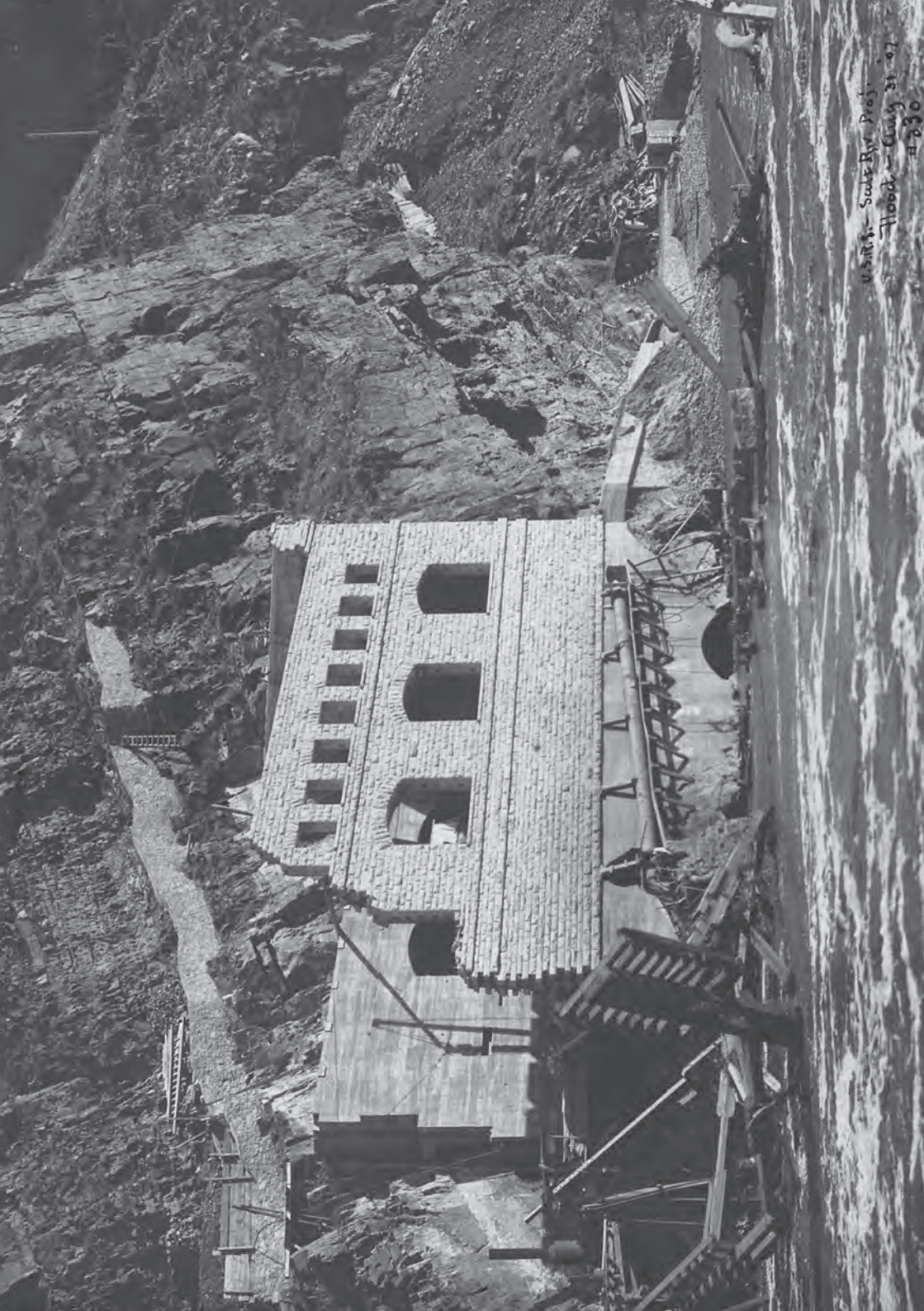
<sup>11</sup> A. Psarra, ‘Cinema Inferno’ (in Greek), *Red Notebook*, <http://www.rednotebook.gr/details.php?id=4858>.

of demand struggles from capital's reproduction, a dynamic which was an integral part of the entire former period, the dynamic of the crisis is now transformed into a dynamic of crisis of the wage relation itself. As the second phase of restructuring is implemented and *informal labour* becomes the leading tendency of capital's blind force, it does not seem at all easy for capital to manage the distinction, necessary for its own reproduction, between the 'integrable' strata of the proletariat and the surplus population. This distinction, the ranking and ordering of labour power, is a structural element of every period of capital, although today the crucial elements are that, on one side, the excluded section tends to become larger, prefiguring a time when it will comprise a significant part of the population, and on the other, the distinction between inclusion and exclusion is now entirely contingent.

Any prediction is dangerous, since the condensation of historical time contains an element of unpredictability and the creation of multiple ruptures. The momentous turn towards the 'national question' is presented as necessary for the reproduction of the current structuring of capital. So is raised the possibility of a left or fascistoid national counter-revolution, which of course could not enjoy the stability (the integration of national-socialism within the bounds of a national social formation into the reproduction of capital) of the fascisms of the past. This counter-revolution can be produced as necessary to capital in its moment of last resort, as it is forced to function under a 'political economy of risk'.

The continually renewed state of war in which the proletariat is forced to make its any demands, the squeeze on the working/unemployed population and the appropriation of practices of conflict will all play into the rising employment of the practices of the (non-)subject of the (non-)excluded. The only thing certain is that Sunday's turning point is only one of a succession that promises to be dense and to keep the nights bright.

Blaumachen and friends, February 2012



U.S.N.R. - Salt River Proj.  
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# The Movement Against the French Pension Reform

A multitude of local struggles which had, for the most part, the common aspect of mobilising stable worker fractions threatened or eliminated by the closing down or restructuring of their company or branch, assembled in the struggle against the pension reform. Without any hope of victory and without any illusions, a fraction of the working class, in France autumn 2010, lived again, in an ideal way, the myth of worker's identity and unity.<sup>1</sup> Workers' identity, eliminated with the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production in the 1970s and 1980s, was revived in an *ideal* way as it was no longer the meaning and general content of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'The previous situation of the class struggle rested on the contradiction between, on the one hand, the creation and development of a labour force set into action by capital in a more and more social and collective way, and on the other hand, by the forms of appropriation of this labour by capital in the immediate process of production and in the process of reproduction, which appeared as limited. Here is the conflictual situation which unfolded as *workers' identity*, and which found its immediate landmarks and modalities of recognition (of confirmation) in the 'big factory,' in the dichotomy between employment and unemployment, labour and training, in the submission of the labour process to the social whole of the working class, in the relations between wages, growth and productivity within a national sphere, in the institutional representations of all that is implied by this, at the level of the factory just as much as at the level of the State.' (*Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution*, p. 40, Ed. Senonevero) Within the self-presupposition of capital, there was production and confirmation of a workers' identity through which class struggle was structured as the *workers' movement*. That has all been annihilated by the restructuring initiated at the beginning of the 1970s, which eliminated workers' identity and a whole declining cycle of struggle, from the official workers' movement to workers' autonomy.

present relation to capital. This 'ideal' wasn't nonetheless fortuitous. It fed from local struggles and found an adequate common denominator in the subject of the struggle *per se*, i.e. retirement, *a symbol of workers' pride*.

The uniqueness of this movement lay in the fact that it was the first, since the French movements of 1995, to occur after this phase of the relation of exploitation went into crisis. In this movement, workers' identity imploded because it had been revived as the fantastical complement to base-unionism. What we will coin under the term 'base-unionism' had to acquire some 'old clothes' in order to accomplish *its own tasks*.

Firstly, we will briefly look at the pension reform within the present course of the relations of exploitation which can define this phase of the mode of capitalist production. How could this reform become a general problem? Secondly, we will look at how the various practices, which made the movement into what it was, implicated with one another, that is, as a unity of the movement wherein its totality is defined as a relation between *base-unionism* and *ideal unity of the class*. At that point, we will also look at why this movement, despite some of its appearances and the rags it sometimes draped itself, belongs to the present cycle of struggles. At the end, we will aim to show the way in which the struggles of this movement took activism (as yet to be defined) out of balance.

## 1) The Pension Reform within the Capitalist Mode of Production's Phase of Crisis Opened by the Restructuring of the 1970s

We have to be clear, some topics do not have the possibility to conclude with an agreement, at bottom because they do not pertain to the field of social negotiation. (Nicolas Sarkozy)

There is no point in striking nowadays. (Eric Woerth) (At the time of events, Nicolas Sarkozy was President of the Republic and Eric Woerth, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs)



*a) Asystematicity of the Demand and Workers' Identity*

The first essential determination of this movement was the asystemic character of the wage demand. The asystematicity of the demand is, within the activity of the class, the practically expressed content of the disappearance of the workers' identity. In the previous cycle of struggle, which ended at the beginning of the 1970s, the existence of the working class was produced and confirmed in the reproduction of capital. Struggles over demands were assumed as a systematic part of the regime of accumulation of that period. The asystematicity of demands and the disappearance of workers' identity are thus inseparable. Some particular or local demand may still be accepted, but the global relationship of capital to labour cannot concede to demands. The shortage of surplus value does not explain it all. While it is true that the 'money is not there', it was just as much 'not there', if not more so, in France or the United States during the 1930s. The asystematicity of demands is fundamental to the structural and qualitative definition of the relation of exploitation in the phase of capitalist production which today is going into crisis. Restructured capitalism has integrated, as a functional feature, the attack against the value of labour power. This feature is structural and permanent: it is not meant to come to an end.

At the end of the nineteenth century, cartelisation and the headlong rush into accumulation of Department I (the production of the means of production) was the reaction from the capitalist mode of production to the loss of balance between the Departments of production, a loss of balance which had brought about a fall in the rate of profit and the 'Great Depression'. In the beginning of the 1930s, Hoover preceded Roosevelt. In the beginning of the 1970s, the politics of 'Keynesian boost' preceded Thatcher, Reagan, and the austerity plan of 1983 in France. In the same fashion, at the beginning of the year 2010, the pressure on the value of the labour force intensified in order to increase the rate of surplus value. Each time during the first phase of a crisis, the capitalist class reacts spontaneously by intensifying that from which the catastrophe came. What follows after is determined by the course of the class struggle, a struggle whose historical forms are specified by the nature of the relation of exploitation which has entered into crisis.

### ***b) The Struggle Against the Pension Reform and its Content***

The second determination of this movement has been its generalisation from the defensive starting point of the *status quo* which, *de facto*, was for the most part obsolete. Within a system of 40 years of added labour time, one is compelled to acquire a protected job and an early career in order to make some sense of the perspective of retirement. Such a situation tends to appear increasingly as a dinosaur among the working class. It is because this defense of the *status quo* transformed itself into a more thorough critique that the movement continued, overcoming the appointed cycle of demonstrations. The system of 40 years of added labour time is a *life sentence*.

The struggle against the pension reform does not reveal anything else other than that which is inscribed into the reform itself. The question is the reorganisation of the *labour market* in the capitalist mode of production as it came from the restructuring of the 1970s, which means precarisation, unemployment for those under 25 years old,<sup>2</sup> and the dismissal of those who are more than 55 years old (2010 saw 350,000 agreed redundancies).

In the new forms of exploitation, the global social labour force is available to capital as a single labour force that is endlessly segmented. This segmentation is a division, a creation of categories, but equally a *continuum* of positions which exist together in the same ensemble infecting one another.

While, until the end of the 1980s, the goal of state action was to encourage withdrawal from the labour market, the capitalist class is now trying to maintain the supply of labour through a great number of new apparatuses. The target is no longer to decrease the rate of unemployment, but rather to increase the rate of employment. In France, there is now more than 10 million workers who are affected by low-salary exemptions, and 8.5 million who receive the *Prime Pour l'Emploi* bonus exemptions. The change of scale is very clear: in 2000, only 2.8 million workers benefited from such employment policies.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Job Center, in France during July of 2010, the rate of those under 25 who had been looking for a job at least within the year had raised 72% in 2 years. This consisted of 109,000 people.

Because it was its real content, the struggle against the pension reform naturally integrated the refusal of and struggle against the organisation of the labour market. *That is how it became a general movement.*

But, if the pension reform involves the totality of workers because it concerns the labour market, for the exact same reason, it involves them in different ways.

This struggle against the pension reform—just as, in a completely different context and with other elements at stake, that of the *Indignados*, the *Occupy* movements, or the Arab revolts—has posed the question of the present definition of the working class in its segmentation.

### ***c) Unity and Segmentation of the Class***

There will not be any unity of the class for itself. This is the third determination of the movement. The question of segmentation is inherent to this cycle of struggle.

The formation of an increasingly unified global labour market as a *continuum* of segments of the proletariat, the implementation of neo-liberal politics, market liberalisation, and international pressure to lower wages and worsen working conditions, amounts not only to the disappearance of a workers' identity, but also means that the common situation of the exploited is nothing other than their separation. The tension towards unity exists within the conflict of such separations. This tension is then, for proletarians, a contradiction with their class belonging. The way in which such a situation is solved is not predetermined: the proletariat calling into question its class belonging, or 'barbarisation', racialisation, sexing, that is to say, forms of counter-revolution which are the closest to revolution. The counter-revolution closest to the revolution is the constant possibility that what is the dynamic of the cycle of struggle becomes its limit. Such a possibility exists in the fact that when struggling as a class is the limit of class struggle, revolution and counter-revolution are closely linked. The revolutionary dynamics of this cycle meet, in its own possibility, the real basis of the counter-revolution.

Three essential determinations have defined this movement: asystematicity of the wage demand, generalisation on the basis of the present labour market, and the disappearance of any unity of the class for itself.



However, at no moment did class belonging appear, nor was it even fleetingly produced, as an external constraint. It only folded itself as an *ideal* unity of the class whose demonstrations were a *representation*, unfolding as a *base-unionism*.

## 2) On Workers' Identity as Base-Unionism's Ideal: Demonstrations, Strikes, GAs and Blockades

### *a) General Direction of the Movement*

The 'strong popular roots' of the struggle against the pension reform constantly referred to by the media was real. It was a social feeling made with the material of an antiquated and obsolete workers' identity. The foundations of this movement were the strikes within the professions which have a particular status or which are still highly structured by a stable and often qualified form of employment, and in sectors where strong collective bargaining agreements organise employment and working conditions. They were at the same time the basis for this ideal unity and workers' identity. Nonetheless, both that which had to be fought and the conditions of struggle dictated by the labour market were the very mark of their obsolescence. In fact, it was another fight that was led, one which belongs to the present; one which comes from a precarised and segmented labour market. It was led against the crisis of restructured capital, but draped in old rags and invoking the blessing of this working class as it was but is now no longer. The issue of the struggle allowed it to happen, and even called for it. The movement, as a totality, was the fragile and inconceivable momentary synthesis of this contradiction in terms.

Anywhere the strikes started and more or less lasted, the struggle 'against the pension reform' contained more outmoded struggles for the improvement of working conditions and the upholding of purchasing power and employment: refineries, ports, garbage collectors, mail carriers, particular lines of the Paris regional train, etc. The strikes remained within their specificities. Actions were sometimes done in common

through different sectors in struggle (e.g. blockading of highway tolls or other traffic points), although they remained a *juxtaposition* of forces. The unity of the class revealed itself in the movement as an outdated dream in which the demand for the withdrawal of the pension reform was only *symbolising*.

***b) The 'Inter-Professional' Assemblies***

The inter-professional GAs,<sup>3</sup> which became unnecessary in the course of the strikes, remained very marginal in their expansion and impact within the development of the struggle. Sometimes they were simply the gathering of unemployed, precarious workers, and students who found a way of participating in the struggle. Under the name of 'inter-professional', they were eventually only the gathering place and activity of a particular segment.

The inter-professional assembly, as is shown by their very late formation, was an admission of weakness in the movement of 2010. In the places where the strength or the will to hold a strike was absent, the scattered workers (mainly teachers, railway workers, and city employees) gathered in order to 'do something' or to keep themselves warm. In other places, it gave the opportunity for the inter-union to upgrade itself, or to go beyond its normal audience.

The unions were never 'outflanked'. The GAs mostly contented themselves with waiting, hoping that the unions would call for a hardening of the movement or a general strike. They never represented the slightest unification of the movement, and neither the unification of the various strikes; they could not do so.

The GAs brought together rank-and-file union militants opposed to or critical towards their hierarchy; unsatisfied and determined striking employees; young workers; precarious workers and unemployed with no

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: Ordinarily, general assemblies are made up of strikers from a particular workplace, organising, for instance, students at a particular facility separately from the teaching staff, and certainly separately from post workers down the road. 'Inter-professional' assemblies are assemblies which are held together by strikers from different workplaces and so on.

place to meet others and for actions; leftists with experience enlisted, or not, in any small group; etc. Confronted with signs of the failure of the inter-union strategy, they organised themselves belatedly as ‘inter-professional’ assemblies—sometimes renamed ‘city assembly’ or ‘citizen assemblies’. The ambition to overcome the union monopoly collided with the absence of the means to do so and with the impossibility especially in this movement of a *critique of unionism that would not look merely forced or artificial*. The inter-professional assemblies, locked within this contradiction, resigned themselves to the role of an unruly auxiliary, a voluntarist refuge for militants dreaming of union acknowledgment, igniting direct actions like a shot in the dark which quickly transformed, through the resonance of the internet, into grandiose actions.

Because they had no means to extend the strikes, the GAs made the blockades their flagship activity, especially as students and precarious workers were often the majority within them. Blockading was one of the most debated questions. The GAs tended to see them as a form that went beyond the strike through its effectiveness, an effectiveness which came from its *potential* to overcome the demand and therefore to have a ‘revolutionary impact’. If the so-called ‘inter-professional’ assemblies were not the expression of any unity of the working class (or of the proletariat), or if they often were the mode of organisation of a particular segment, one has to ask the same questions about the blockades. Were they, in this movement, the practice through which the segmentation of the working class and its struggles were overcome? Were they the realisation, even partially, of their unity?

### ***c) The Blockades***

While stories and testimonies abound, and despite some flights of fancy, at the end of the day, they all ultimately tell us that the blockades were inscribed in the specific course of each strike, sometimes compensating for its weakness, that they presented another aspect of the same struggles, and that union directives were never overstepped.

An emblematic example is that of the refineries: ‘Most of the strikers, to my knowledge, were not even present at the pickets. They were

staying home and the core of union members mobilised were not enough for the blockades. They had to therefore accept some help through the inter-unions assemblies of the city, and as such had to accept ending up with a few turbulent individuals, ones however who could basically be controlled from a distance, if not isolated. In any case, the famous external blockades also offered the benefit of the 'blockaders' staying at the gates of the sites, or in the surrounding area, never coming inside.' (Peter Vener, *Trois lettres sur les blocages*)

That the present forms of struggle (e.g. blockading and GAs) are not in accordance with the preferences of the regular union leadership does not mean that they express the overcoming of unionism. Unionism, which is a necessary function of the existence of the proletariat in its reciprocal implication with capital, is an activity that does not limit itself to union organisations. A coordination of the simple activities of strikers can be unionist, without any apparatuses or unions. A base-unionism can exist formally or informally, or conversely, embedded in the most official organisations. As was shown by the struggle against the pension reform, unionism is not structurally a question of organisation or of a formal institution, but a mode of activity. Unionism, with or without institutions, is always invented anew in the class struggle.

The end of workers' identity, recognised and confirmed in the reproduction of capital, contains a crisis of the trade union and political representations of the working class. With this, unionism in its broader sense has become diffused, and this is what we call 'base-unionism' in this text. The asystematicity of the wage demand adds even more sensitivity and instability to this phenomenon. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, there was an overflowing of union activity. Autonomous organisations appeared, rank-and-file strike committees fought, often with physical violence, against the central unionism. The latter did not modify its strategy, and persisted against those *contestations*, a mode of existence, which fundamentally expressed the conflictual, but functional, role of the demand and acknowledgement of workers' identity in that period.

During the autumn of 2010, unionist blockades accepted the support of all people, despite the obvious preventive moves of the CGT against

anything unsupervised. In the same fashion which the inter-union assemblies organised the demonstrations, the support of blockades was accepted precisely as a support for fair demands connected to the largely unanimous wage demand for the defense of pensions. As a form of struggle similar to the blockades, the flying pickets, of which the former are the latter's *raison d'être*, do not carry any *potentiality* written into its DNA. One can hope for 'intensifying the balance of power', but that doesn't express anything about the content of this 'balance of power', and above all, one can intensify only that which tries to achieve intensification, and when such is the case, this quickly becomes clear. Obviously this was not the case in the movement of autumn 2010.

The blockading of production ends up being considered in itself as the last act before the passage to revolution (communisation). The struggle for demands would somehow, through the course of the struggle, overcome itself and its demands-based character. Here emerges a loop between the concept of the blockade and the 'necessity' of intervention.

The really existing blockades inscribed themselves within the activity of the strikes. In each case, their efficacy remained conditioned by the continuation or non-existence of the strike on the blocked site. The flying and episodic blockades were conditioned by the general continuation of the strikes. Only exceptionally have the blockades 'overflowed the frames imposed by the unions' (leaflet *Premier Round* distributed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October demonstration in Paris), who had, from the beginning until the end, initiated and controlled the large majority of them. At the points where the blockades were able to have minimum efficacy (the refineries), it was obvious, even in the speeches of the media and the State, that 'blockaders' and 'strikers' were identical. Whether it was in Avignon, Strasbourg, or Rennes, the autonomous GAs realised that their attempted actions were little without the 'local union bureaucracies'. The only thing that could make blockading into a particular practice would be its 'generalisation' in the form of 'blockades of the flows'. But if one looks at the October movement, enthusiasm has to be revised. Blockading is not an abstract practice which contains a meaning that is always present with no regard to the movement in which it is embedded. By

such reasoning, one ends up considering the October movement to have not gone far enough, thereby ending in a state of divergence with one of its own practices; or that it is one of its own practices which ended up in a state of divergence with the movement, which is to say the same thing.

The actual practice of blockading is then compared to an intrinsic sense of the Practice of Blockading (with a capital 'P' and a capital 'B'). Alongside the enthusiasm aroused by the blockades, the evaluation of the really existing blockades was always made in relation to a practice of blockading out of any context or 'actuality'. As soon as one essentialises elements of the real, one is then forced to talk in terms of *potentiality* (see further down concerning activism).

Aside from their demands, the blockades didn't ask for anything other than struggle. In the refineries, the very unionist blockades were genuinely existing strikes. Both the strikes and the blockades had demands; the situation was not that of the *banlieue* riots in 2005 or December 2008 in Greece. On the contrary, one can understand the extension of the blockades as the circumvention of the weakness of the movement, as a kind of palliative, or even as the effect of a strong reluctance to engage in a tougher conflict aware that it would lose. There is evidence from the movement of an awareness that the demand playing the central and unifying role would not achieve anything worthwhile. It is not a matter of coincidence that strikes were more or less not in the majority and that they could sustain themselves only at those locations where they engaged in conflicts other than that of the pension reform. The reason the strikes of autumn 2010 did not paralyse the economy was not because they were controlled, but because they were not widely supported nor massive (except on the big demonstration days or in particular sectors).

Nevertheless, one cannot, by correctly reducing the blockades to demand activity, disregard their specific meaning *within the demand activity*. First of all, the practice of blockading is related to the general conditions of wage labour, unemployment included. Processes of production whose locations are fragmented, and the segmented labour force that this calls into being, creates corresponding forms of struggles which are their own. If in the autumn 2010 movement, we were generally faced

with strikes in those sectors with 'communities of labour' which are more or less stable but threatened, nonetheless the presence within those strikes of blockades, and the diversity of the participants mobilised, signify that *those 'communities' are nothing other than moments of a general segmentation of the labour force.*

Secondly however, what might seem strange in the movement is that the blockades, which undeniably correspond to the general present forms of wage labour and the global utilisation of the labour force, appeared in locations where the term 'communities of labour', largely reduced to almost nothing by capital in its restructuring, is not completely obsolete. Those 'communities of labour', where they still could formalise themselves, have been the referent and guarantee of the movement in its characteristics and constitutive contradictions, utilised as a pivot for the blockades and as a gathering force. But, those 'communities of labour', being too weak to even progress on their demands which were both specific and anachronistic in respect to their existence, gave themselves the form of the general within those blockades without abandoning their particularity. This form of the general was determined by the modifications acquired by the wage relation, that is to say, *by that which signifies their anachronism.*

#### ***d) Base-Unionism***

Blockading is an emblematic activity of what we call 'base-unionism'. The activity of blockading manifests a class unity in a period when the existence of such a unity is no longer confirmed in the reproduction of capital as a precondition to revolutionary struggle. Since the restructuring, and even more since the beginning of the crisis of this phase of the capitalist mode of production, unity is empty if it does not entail the proletariat questioning its own existence as a class.

What appears as a unity is the Brownian motion of elements which are constantly eluding their own belonging to the same set, in the comings and goings between one place and another. In these struggles blockades did not *produce* class belonging as an external constraint, but instead

*experienced as alien*, which had to be re-discovered as an *infinite sum* to be constructed. The unity is then nothing more than juxtaposition and sum; it is nothing in itself.

On the basis of, and against, the objectified unity of the class within capital, the rebuilding of a kind of radical and autonomous workers movement as a precondition to revolution is no longer possible. The only way to have unity within the class struggle is rather through communist measures. The present necessity to overcome their condition is found by the wage earners within themselves, that is to say, *in their relation with capital*; in their inability to associate themselves without questioning the relation that bonds them together *for capital*, and which divides them *for themselves* in an infinity of situations and practices.

The unity of the class exists; it exists *within capital*. The differences are not accidents to be erased. The situation of the class has become an alien objective unity within capital. What is at stake in class struggle is not the suppression of the segmentation in a unity. This is a formal response that is already obsolete. The dynamic is *not* to get rid of the segmentation, of the differences. The dynamic is rather the contradiction between, on the one hand, those class struggles in their diversity and, on the other, the unity of the class objectified within capital. The point is not to say that the more the class is divided the better, but that the generalisation of a movement of strikes, the multiplicity of struggles, is not synonymous with the unity of the class, i.e. with the overcoming of differences that are considered solely as accidental and formal. One has to understand what is at stake between those diffuse, segmented and discontinuous movements: *the creation of a distance from this 'substantial' unity objectified within capital*.

The movement against the pension reform wasn't removed from this situation but rather gave it a very individualised tone. From the particularities of the central demand and with the specificities of the main sectors involved in the strikes, and against that unity of the objectified class within capital which is for itself only segmentation, the movement understood itself as the recomposition of the unity of the class for itself.



But this could only be an *ideal* unity. Base-unionism produced this ideal unity of the class as its necessary complement and completion, and found the representation of this unity in the large demonstrations. It was, in fact, the confirmation of the disappearance of the *real* unity of the class for itself.

It is through the particular actions of *base-unionism* that the *ideal identity* is actively produced at the same time those actions, within these characteristics, reveal this identity to be ideal. Base-unionism is not a way out of unionism. Nor, in the same way, the reciprocal support between sectors in struggle is a way out of corporatism and segmentations; it is rather their addition.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, its diffuse character is not only a formal change; it means that the question is now that of the unity of the class, that of the modalities of its objective existence within capital. The question is that of the struggle as a class being the limit of class struggle. *The way out from the division is not the sum of the divided elements, it is rather the suppression of what divide them:* the fact of being proletarians and therefore to have the unity of their existence as a class represented against them as objectified in the reproduction of capital.

The asystemic character of the demand is not merely a new situation, a type of framework in which struggles with demands unfold without undergoing any change, and having the sole new characteristic of not being able to achieve anything. The asystematicity of the demand is a transformation of practices with demands which double themselves: on the one hand, into base practices which are local and more or less autonomous vis-à-vis union confederations (which are themselves, for example with the CGT, filled with contradictions), and on the other hand, into the production of *class unity as the ideal that those practices invoke and contradict*.

Each segment in struggle, although remaining in its particularity, considers itself as a segment of the 'proletariat in struggle'. This was the role of

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<sup>4</sup> This can even sometimes be an algebraic sum: for example, in Marseille, the support of the strikers in the West Bay stands antagonistic to the interests of the strikers of the East Bay, wherein the support of one set of jobs meant the destruction of another.

the big demonstrations *and* of the circulations of the actors in the blockades. During these demonstrations, one could hear the sound equipment announcing the segments present just as how delegations are announced during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. The magical word of 'convergence' has been used everywhere from the union hierarchies to the most anarcho-activist committees of struggle. The task was then seen as the restoration of workers' identity even though the importance of what was happening in the disseminated struggles lay precisely in its disappearance. Through the blockades and the GAs, the workers in struggle were indeed going from each sector assisting one another. But as the Italian *operaisti* would have said: there is no longer any sector which is able to play the role of the crystallisation of a 'class recomposition'. During the whole history of programmatism, up until (and including) workers' identity, the unity was always something that defined itself as such and was for itself; unity was more than the mere addition of the parts.

Nonetheless, in the struggles of autumn 2010, class belonging as a limit only appeared as an ideal to be (re)established; it was never produced as an external constraint. Objectified in capital, the unity of the class became the dream the proletariat wanted to realise. Its problematic character constituted the whole dynamic of the movement. The central demand, in its character of having no possibility of being satisfied, played another role: that of a symbolic unity. The particular characteristics of the movement (pension as the central demand, the main categories in struggle) made the movement one of seeking to live the exterior unity of the class as an interiority.

'No one represents us' said the demonstrators appropriately since there was nothing to *represent*. Base-unionism is the expression of a movement that is altogether very anchored, diffused and without *representation*. Base-unionism is not a matter of organisation, it does not favour necessarily this or that organisation, or even the absence of a permanent organisation; a union like the CGT can be base-unionist. Base-unionism is a functional mode of existence of the proletariat's relation to capital once there is no longer a preliminary unity of the class opposite capital, that is, when there is no longer a workers' identity. It is the functional form

(that is to say, the form which holds the structure of the relation and doesn't attach itself to any immediate form) of the inevitable existence of demands once demands have become asystemic. Base-unionism permeates this cycle of struggle and it tends to become, in the present crisis, the dominant formalisation of the action *qua* class as a limit. Like self-organisation, with which it tends to get confused with, base-unionism is only the first step, one which has to be crossed in the production of class belonging as an external constraint within struggle.

Throughout the course of the movement, the high school students, by their own presence and activities, have signified that this unity and this workers' identity are, in the present moment, nothing more than an ideal. One hoped and waited for them to appear *as high school students*, but it was *as rioters* that they appeared. In the streets, the high school students were the end of workers' identity in action. They disturbed the logic of the constitutive contradiction of this movement, *a logic which, through the mediation of the social composition of the sectors most visible in the strikes represented, made an ideal workers' identity the natural and necessary complement of base-unionism*.

During the two 'hot' days in Lyon, the State immediately delivered what force it could in order to nip in the bud these types of actions, and focused, in the repression, on the high school students who had no right to be on the streets.<sup>5</sup> Expressed through social, urban, racial, and generational segregation, the workers' identity is dead for good.

The famous 'self-organisation of struggles' in which base-unionism culminates is still a form of relation between struggles with demands and an understanding of revolution as overgrowth.<sup>6</sup> It would be the unity

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<sup>5</sup> The same day, the police in Paris organised a traffic diversion of 500 feet around the sit-in of 150 high school students from a prestigious high school.

<sup>6</sup> Translator's note: 'Transcroissance', or 'overgrowth', is a term used by Trotsky to describe the manner in which he thought the bourgeois revolution in Russia, or other less developed areas, could grow into a proletarian revolution, an analysis that has not been borne out by experience. In the texts from *Théorie Communiste*, the term is also used to refer to the more general, and for them equally mistaken, idea that everyday class struggle, wage struggles and defense of jobs, etc., can simply generalise into revolutionary struggle. This conception is for them part and parcel of programmatism (i.e. the programme based on the liberation of labour). Adapted from *Aufheben* no. 12, p. 37 footnote 6

of the class, the ‘convergence of struggles’, the (formal) overgrowth of struggles with demands into the revolution, while entailing at the very same time its opposite, a class that would carry its own negation. In other words: having your cake and eating it too. Completely off on the wrong foot by this base-unionism—whereby it finally saw a unity of the class that could no longer be an affirmation *qua* dominant class—activism thought the time had come for its encounter with workers’ struggles.

### 3) Activism as Misunderstanding

One can today be a railway worker, yesterday unemployed, tomorrow a precarious worker, and the day after that a squatter or undocumented immigrant. Activism is the permanent ‘What is to be done?’ in an era where everything that constituted workers’ identity has vanished. It is a permanent ‘What is to be done?’ which no longer has the mediation between the *particular* struggles and the *general* existence of the class, that is to say, the workers’ identity and/or the (existing or to be built) Party, nor the maturation of the class. In all these definitions, there was, generally speaking, a ‘being’ of the proletariat to be revealed, whether this ‘being’ was explicit in its political, trade union, or institutional mediations or impeded by them. This generality of the proletariat implies that all particularities are nothing more than contingencies, accidents.

Caught *without mediation* in between the general and the particular, activism is a set of *tactics* that is always unsatisfied with both itself and anyone else (until the next action). As essentially tactics, activism functions like a tool box: generalisation of the action, overcoming of the categorical demands, self-organisation of the struggle, refusal of mediations, autonomy, etc. Consequently, if it is not definitive, it is a strong tendency: activism is normative. Action is then constructed as a question, i.e. as an intervention. The construction of this question makes an abstraction of the diversity of activities: Practice as an abstraction. The question of intervention transforms what is done (or what cannot be done) in this or that struggle—practices which are always particular—into an *abstraction of practice*. It justifies itself by fabricating a dilemma: intervention or waitism.

And now, in this movement against the pension reform of 2010, with the GAs and mainly with the blockades, activism sets foot upon the unknown land of strikes and worker's demands. Finally, it thought it had entered the promise land.

***a) Generality and Corporatism: Activism off on the Wrong Foot***

In this movement, activism was off on the wrong foot by the fact that its practices which previously appeared as the most radical, those which are usually part of its formula of 'going beyond', were now precisely bound to 'corporatism', to particular and specific demands. By its very nature, activism was led to an erroneous analysis. It could not understand that the strongest actions and sectors were not the beginnings, or even less, the 'vanguard' (e.g. the student GA of Rennes) of a generalisation of the movement, but rather that these actions existed on a particular basis and were, amongst other things, controlled by the unions.

At that moment when there could have been an encounter between activists and the more or less official strikers, it never took place. On the contrary, what occurred instead was an absorption of the former into what was most particular and corporative in the movement. With the blockades, activists thought they were realising the unity and generality of the class which legitimates their existence and their practice. They did however realise this existence and practice in a real and trivial way: on the one hand, as a conscious and happy auxiliary of the CGT, and on the other, in the practice of the blockade as a dreamed unity, as the 'potentiality' of this unity. Activists were doubly happy: first because they were finally *part of it*, and second, because the CGT was not fulfilling the function of being the presupposed generality of the class; it was now the activists' job to be the revealers and harbingers of this generality. They could not see, however, that their own presence was only due to the disappearance of the presupposed generality of the class, and therefore that their action confirmed this disappearance. Activism, absorbed in the particularities and the activities of base-unionism, got off on the wrong foot. Weightlessness is the nature of the movement of activism. For its dreamed practices, it floated; for its real practices (being nothing more than the

auxiliary of the CGT), it was weighted down by lead soles. Even if it sometimes could be conscious of it, the denial of this situation was ready at hand in the form of another one of activism's constants: potentiality.

### *b) 'Potentiality'*

With the practice of blockading, potentiality had found its form. Militantism always supposes a lack in the situation, as in the existing practice; the lack, the potentiality and the tendency are constitutive concepts of militantism. Blockading possesses the huge benefit of dissolving the invisible boundary which makes it so hard for the 'permanent revolutionaries' to have access to 'where it's at'. From the open inter-professional assembly to the GA, and from there to blockading, there is only a step, and suddenly, the critique of 'interventionism' disappears: there is no longer an inside and an outside. But to arrive to that, one must have developed an ideology of the *blockade form*. The only problem is that, just as for the riot, the question doesn't lie at a certain level of violence, of legality (the strike), or illegality (the blockage), of fusion within action, but in the struggles' real content and in the moment which fosters them.

What allows the ideology of blockading to emerge is that the opposition between strikes and blockades mimics the duality of the demand/its absence, or that of particular/universal. As the strikes are supposed to stay imprisoned in a demand relation, the blockades are then permissive of a way out from this relation *qua* fantastical creation of a zero point that would open all possibilities: the blockading of the economy.

At the point where activism tries to float above the immediate practices in which it was invested in the course of the movement, at the point where it considers itself as implementing this potentiality which is the justification of all its attitudes vis-à-vis all which exists, then all the strategies it invokes as its own consist in recreating the true unity of the class for itself as a revolutionary movement. This unity would be true since it would be without representation or mediation. These practical and theoretical perspectives boil down to an effort at making radical base-unionism permanent, which is in actuality a contradiction consisting in being the expression of a class' existence for itself opposed to its own class situation.

Whether this subject is 'the working class' or the 'whomever' that weaves links 'which are not those that pre-exist a class belonging' (*Rebetiko*), the most intimate nature of activism lies in the fact of presupposing a general subject on which it can act as the *revealer* of generality. The question which, by its nature, activism cannot ask is that of a disappearance of the generality as the presupposed unity of the subject that it addresses (whatever this subject might be). It is completely out of activism's possible range of vision that the class struggle might be the fact of an essentially segmented class in its contradiction with capital, and that nothing in this contradiction can overcome this segmentation (other than the abolition of capital).

***c) A Radicalism which Belongs to the Old Cycle of Struggle and an Idealism which Belongs to the Present Limits***

Naively and without any prior reflection, activism appropriated the category of the workers' movement and its collapse to the traditional and common life of the class struggle, and then, just as naively, made the workers' movement the definition and prior unity of the class struggle. Activism then asks itself what is the present nature of this unity, of this generality of the struggle against capitalist society, *which is its raison d'être*. Its relative success in the movement disoriented it. Base-unionism, which was the entryway for activism, is for it the foundation of a general unified recomposition of the class. From this point on, activism means, firstly, the obsolescence of the empowering of the proletariat as a stepping stone for the revolution, and secondly, that class belonging has become the limit of class struggle. It means, however, all this only as a symptom.

Indeed, when it is activism which sees in base-unionism the basis for the unity of the class and its ability to struggle as a class against its own situation, this signifies there is no longer the unity of the class as preliminary to its abolition and that the struggle *qua* class has become a limit of class struggle. Activism cannot be this unity because this unity can only exist in an institutionalised way and recognised (confirmed) by capital. With the real subsumption of labour under capital, this unity is always a construction in the self-presupposition of the capitalist mode of

production, which is to say that, by nature, it is for activism a contradiction in terms. When activism projects itself as a unity within base-unionism, it is the symptom of the fact that base-unionism is not a unity. The more it goes in search of this unifying activity, the more the answer to the question it has posed to itself involves inextricable contradictions, that is, the disappearance and recomposition of this unity. There is no longer a unity of the class for itself outside of its objectified existence in capital; to act as a class is the limit of class struggle.

The question we have to ask ourselves is not that of an *a priori* unity, but that of the extension, or not, of the separations. This is the question asked in the struggles when they tend to generalise: the tension towards unity is only the fact of a collision with the reality of separation. The 'community of situation' is only given in an abstract or general way in what we are within capital; it becomes a real tension only in struggles. But that requires the presence in the struggle of this tension towards unity, that is to say, a dynamic of calling into question these segmentations. This does not mean the maximalist expectation of The Revolution, but rather the production within a struggle of class belonging as an external constraint, the appearance, even a fleeting one, of rift activities, i.e. within the struggle *qua* class, of practices going against its demands-based character, of attacks by proletarians upon all that defines them in their proletarian situation including all forms of representation. This is the only way the segmentation can be posed as a problem: once it merges with the identification of class belonging itself *and not when this class belonging is assumed to contain a unity to which one would only have to give a form*. If this unity has only been considered as an *a priori* underlying ontology, the solution, i.e. the overcoming of this situation of fragmentation, is only formal since its content is always present as a potentiality. It is then considered that some practices would have, by their own form (e.g. blockades, occupations, etc.), the potentiality to make this *a priori* unity become real.

Activism ends up championing what has vanished: the latent generality of the class and its prospect as a revolutionary perspective, i.e. self-organisation. In activism, the latter becomes an ideology and duly



records its own failure by eclipsing the subject which leaves it high and dry. It used to be that the self-organisation *of the proletarians* would lead to the revolution as the confirmation of the class. It is now instead 'the self organisation *of struggles*' whose function is to 'break frozen social identities'. Activism is an idealism of the previous cycle of struggles; it is a mad obsession with the forms that culminates in the 'self organisation of struggles' and their 'convergences', expressions which have not only become empty in their content, but which also, once they are promoted as radical practices, validate the present limit of class struggle. Liberated and purified by the collapse of the workers' movement, the radical forms of the previous cycle of struggle are now supposed to become 'revolutionary'.

The vicious circle of activism lies then in the pursuit of that whose disappearance is precisely the *raison d'être* of its existence. 'Actions are multiplying and strengthening in their convergence', 'the waged rank-and-file ends up an orphan'. The mistake of the first proposition is necessary in order for activism to present itself, and in the second case, as the adoptive parents of the orphan. The comical aspect of this situation lies in the fact that activism conceives and presents itself as the replacement of the workers' movement, the disappearance of which is exactly how it can come to exist. *Activism at present is experienced as the radicality of the previous cycle of struggle, finally rendered possible*, that of the workers' identity and of self-organisation. It is in practice in contradiction with that which it claims to be its perspective: revolution as communisation.

## In Conclusion

Beyond their diffuse, diverse and segmented character, and the plurality of their more or less complementary and opposed forms, the struggles against the pension reform in France of Autumn 2010 established a coherence. Between the asystematicity of the demand, the manifestation of an ideal workers' identity, base-unionism, and the role played by activism, we attended and participated not only in the implosion of the

workers' identity, but also in the manifestation of class belonging within the class struggle as its limit. This limit of the present cycle of struggles was there in its specificity, both as much as in the acknowledged asystematicity of the demand with which the rage relating to political representation, but also in this base-unionism which invigorated the movement throughout. This base-unionism, at the same time that it was the pedestal on which the workers' unity and identity could be dreamed, one which the particularity of the sectors at the head of the struggle made credible, was also, in deed, the obsolescence of this unity and identity.

This movement evoked three questions. The first is that of the segmentation of the proletariat, a segmentation which can no longer be considered as the essential and potential unity, but only as the definition of the proletariat. The second question is that of the overcoming of the necessary demands-based character of class struggle, that is to say, the overcoming of the struggle *qua* class in the class struggle. In the alliance between base-unionism and an ideal unity/identity, both questions met and are now combined. The third question, a more general one, is that of the definition of classes and of the proletariat in particular.

But also: ideology of workers' identity, struggles for direct interests, de-objectification of the social relation of exploitation, political representation; all the instances of the capitalist mode of production which compose the class struggle are put into play together, and are made to play with their allocation and the accepted determination of their relationship. There will be ideology, economy, sex, social, societal, and politics in a revolutionary movement which will, in the course of the struggle, overcome all this by the disruption of the hierarchies and determinations between these instances of the mode of production which presupposes itself through their fixity. A final question then appears: that of the definition as *conjuncture* of a revolutionary situation, or more modestly, of an acute and generalised situation of class conflicts.

R.S.



# The Feral Underclass Hits the Streets

## *On the English Riots and Other Ordeals*

### Like a Summer With a Thousand Augusts?

The summer riots of '81 were the foretaste of the future for us. One day sooner or later the roof is going to blow off the UK. Faced with an assertion like this most people in pubs, streets, supermarkets or at work tend to nod their heads. The old phlegmatic reassurances that 'it can't happen here' have finally gone—let it be forever.<sup>1</sup>

This overt optimism, that was the result of the riots that shook Britain in the early '80s, was absent in the aftermath of the August unrest. This time, it was ambivalence, perplexity and critical distance that followed the riots, rather than enthusiasm and hope. Numbness has been the prevalent feeling within activist milieus and militant circles, not to mention the reactions of whatever can be called 'the Left' in this country. Reading through many accounts, one gets the impression that the riots were now seen more as a 'necessary evil' than a foretaste of the future.

The chaotic and convulsive character of the August unrest, its huge distance from what could be normatively called a proletarian struggle, the impossibility for it to fit in a longed-for movement for working class empowerment, provoked a certain nostalgia for the early '80s. More than a few hurried to belittle the summer riots to something like a social defecation, as compared to the '80s riots that advanced beyond anger and

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<sup>1</sup> *Like a Summer With a Thousand Julys... And Other Seasons...*, Wolfie Smith, Speed, Tucker and June, 1982.

frustration, into affirming a communal spirit and endorsing a political aspiration. This time, rioters fell behind as they are perceived not to have pursued what they could have ideally done, namely seek to lay the first stones for re-creating a strong, autonomous proletarian movement, through self-organisation and class solidarity. It is in the last instance a matter of the consciousness of the proletarian Subject to realise the forever given revolutionary Practice for the best, as Marlowe reminds us:

Anger is necessary to want to revolt against the system, but this mix of rage and opportunism had no perspective. For me it shows the absolute necessity for a class expression that can provide a context for the development of consciousness, and a focus for collective action. Outside of this, explosions of anger can be dangerously self-defeating.<sup>2</sup>

The Subject's recent shortcomings are seen as a result of contemporary symptoms of social pathology, such as individualism and consumerism. Looked at from an empirical/normative point of view, the summer riots appear in many respects similar to a number of other historical urban riots. Like many other waves of rioting before them they were sparked by inflammatory police behaviour and were characterised by people's outraged response; like other riots, they spread rapidly to encompass many individuals and activities with little connection to the initial protest out of which they emerged; like other riots, they did not seek to negotiate specific demands; like other riots, they included violent practices against the state and private property. The problem with such a normative approach is that it poses as its starting point 'riots' as an abstract category, whose concrete manifestations are each time a quantitatively varied mixture of practices which are considered typically constitutive of it. As such,

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<sup>2</sup> And he continues: 'I don't know how this is to come about, and it has been frustrating not to have seen more explicit political expression. It certainly shows that immiseration on its own doesn't generate consciousness' (Marlowe, IP blog, August 2011). Nothing personal against Marlowe, he just summarises well what has been said or implied by many ultra-leftist or anarchist accounts of the riots. For an academic version of the same approach, see for instance the text *Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets* by David Harvey.

riots, rather than being seized as a concrete moment of class struggle, are singled out as a set of practices in the abstract, with its own relative autonomy. Their position within the totality they were removed from is then re-established as a relation to the context they emerge in, which is grasped as essentially exogenous to riot-in-itself. Riots were separated from their objectivity to be reunited with it, but to be reunited only in their separateness. History having been annihilated, what exists in reality appears as a concretisation (realisation) of the eternal abstract. Concrete practices are merely seen as occasional manifestations of Practice as an abstraction. And Practice as such, as an entity, acquires meaning relative to its equally abstract complement, class struggle as in the last instance historyless *antithesis* between two classes (a face off), an eternal present, a continuum without breaks, but only with ups and downs, successes and failures (history only provides the background colour to this antithesis). Hence the specific determinations of concrete practices are missed as incidental and inessential. The question of communism becomes then an issue of 'the return of the repressed' which has been striving to find its way into (class) consciousness.

Taking the position that class struggle is history literally, we mean that classes are bound together in an asymmetrical relation, which is a *contradiction* that develops, a contradiction in movement, at the core of an effectively—and equivalently moving—structured totality (capitalist society) as it is constituted, reconstituted—in the form of breaks and discontinuities (past revolutions and the counter-revolutions that followed them)—and reproduced as such in each historical period. The fact that the reproduction of the relation of exploitation is contradictory (labour is always necessary and always in excess/the tendency of the rate of profit to fall) poses communism as the real movement that resolves the contradiction through the revolutionary action of the proletariat that abolishes capital and itself. Taken this way, the August unrest was a historically specific event belonging to the totality that has the contradiction between classes at its core, as it exists today—(restructured capitalism and its crisis). Even further, it belongs to the present moment—what has been elsewhere called *the era of riots*—within the unfolding of the

crisis of restructured capitalism,<sup>3</sup> as this present moment appears in the specificities of British capitalism, and this in the terms that defined the unrest, namely the composition of the people involved, the variety of their practices (and predominance of some practices over others), their temporal-spatial trajectory, the forms of organisation/coming together of the rioters, their goals and aspirations (or lack of aspirations), their relation to their social surroundings and the rest of the episodes of class struggle in this historical moment. The limit of the unrest was not external to riot-in-itself, but intrinsic to its very nature, the flip side of its dynamic. The August unrest calls for a theorisation of the issues it posed by its emergence and its relation to the rest of the manifestations of class struggle today with regard to the communist revolution produced by the current cycle of struggles. This is what is at stake!

## Restructuring and the Making of the New Dangerous Classes

The August unrest was defined by the absence not only of immediate demands but also of any prospect for an improvement of conditions of existence. The rioters attacked, in what they are, the proletarian situation now, namely the precarisation of labour power. In the absence of demands and in their concrete practices, namely looting, arson of commercial and public buildings, attacks at the police and police stations, the wish to become an ‘ordinary proletarian’—a worker with a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work—was made obsolete. This was intrinsically related to the rioters’ specific situation. This situation’s genealogy in the historical development of the class contradiction, its place in the contradiction’s reproduction today, must be sought in the major contradictory dynamics of restructured capitalism and the upsetting its crisis caused to the relation of exploitation.

The restructuring re-defined the relation of exploitation. It aimed at abolishing all that had become an obstacle to the fluidity of the self-presupposition of capital. It upset the constraints in circulation and

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<sup>3</sup> See Woland, ‘The Transitional Phase of the Crisis: The Era of Riots’, *Blaumachen* no. 5, June 2011.



accumulation and created a new era of increasing rate of profit (roughly in the '90s and the first half of the 2000s). The financialisation of capitalism as a whole was the new architecture, the new design of the mechanism for the equalisation of the rates of profit. The negotiation of the price of labour power ceased to be integrated into the dynamic of accumulation as had been in the previous era (wages-productivity deal). By breaking down all that had become a rigidity in the crisis of the 'Keynesian period', capital has been trying to free itself from maintaining the level of reproduction of the proletariat as labour power, which has been increasingly dealt with as a mere cost—the wage demand has become asystemic. At the very core of restructured capitalism lies the disconnection of proletarian reproduction from the valorisation of capital—within a dialectic of immediate integration (real subsumption) and disintegration of the circuits of reproduction of capital and the proletariat—and the precarisation of this reproduction,<sup>4</sup> which against the background of the rising organic composition of social capital and the global real subsumption of society to capital, has made the production of superfluous labour power an *intrinsic* element of the wage relation in this period.

The restructuring disintegrated traditional working class communities and modes of coming together (material belonging to a community), a process that in Britain went hand in hand with the dismantling of huge parts of the manufacturing industry and working class strongholds tied up with it. The trend was to transform the working class from a collective subject confronting the bourgeoisie into a sum of proletarians, every one of whom is individually related to capital and each other, without the mediation of the practical experience of a common class identity and workers' organisations that would represent the class as a recognised social partner, accepted to participate at the table of collective bargaining.<sup>5</sup> This transformation was carried out through (and reinforced) a

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<sup>4</sup> See Screamin' Alice, 'On the Periodisation of the Capitalist Class Relation', *Sic* no. 1, November 2011.

<sup>5</sup> This process of individualisation of the working class was accompanied by the ideological attack against the identity of being a worker, producing it as an unwanted behavioural identity, while glorifying wealth and private property. The working class ceased to be something to be proud of and became something to be despised.



huge mutation of wage labour, starting in the '80s: transformation of the technical composition of capital and labour processes, shift to services, flexibilisation and intensification of work, individualisation of employment contracts, discontinuity and dispersion of occupational paths and the rise of underpaid, precarious work against the background of enduring unemployment.

This disintegration of the working class did not mean *ipso facto* a universal impoverishment of the wage earners. Many workers saw their collective bargaining power undermined through the fragmentation of services, privatisation and subcontracting. But a lot of the remaining stable parts of the working class (to a large extent those still unionised) maintained their wages, while for many, mortgage-backed home ownership and consumer credit meant a rise in living standards. At the same time, new waged middle strata emerged that could aspire to claiming a share of the wealth produced by the increasing profitability during the ascending phase of the cycle of accumulation by working hard and flexibly in education-intensive jobs and maintaining easy access to credit. The mobilisation of cheap labour force in the new industrial zones in the 'developing' world (globalisation and global division of labour) permitted the increased consumer power not only of the executives, managers and consultants, but even of workers that saw their real wages stagnating or declining. The ideology that accompanied the individualisation of the working class was the glorification of private ownership and individual responsibility for success or failure: 'anyone can make it if they work hard enough'. All the more, individual workers should invest in their individual labour power, instead of capital (via the state) investing in the working class.

But on the wrong end of the stick, employment shifts from traditional working class occupations to deskilled services positions, the erosion of organised labour and the creeping unraveling of welfare into a springboard towards precarious employment have all brought on the pauperisation of significant numbers of proletarians, among whom proletarians from non-white/British ethnic or racial backgrounds were disproportionately represented. For them, economic restructuring has brought erratic employment in low-paid jobs, while for many it has meant a tendency

towards economic redundancy and social marginality. The management of unemployment (that came to be presented as the direct consequence of an inherently pre-existing personal 'unemployability') through workfare on the one hand has been aiming at pushing the dispossessed to the peripheral sectors of the labour market, thus blurring the boundaries between wage work and the dole while squeezing wages at the same time downwards, and, on the other, had the effect of recreating the market for low-end consumer commodities and by that means also the jobs which, for the most part, the long term structurally unemployed have been expected to aspire to. The polarisation of the class structure has been inherent in the restructuring and the ascending phase of restructured capitalism: redistribution of wealth upwards, sharp divergence of living standards between the lower strata of the proletariat and the redefined middle strata (let alone the bourgeoisie) as well as between different regions of the country and different areas within the same city, intense segmentation and stratification of the proletariat. The influx of women and migrants into the labour market was a significant contributor to this process.

The disintegration of the working class and the pauperisation of the lower proletarian strata went hand in hand with the re-drawing of the social map of the cities and the penalisation of poverty, the making of the contemporary diffuse ghetto, that is the spatial determination of the new dangerous classes. The entire social housing structure was transformed to encourage home ownership (right-to-buy policies and simultaneous drop in the state's spending on housing).<sup>6</sup> This provided a chance for the more

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<sup>6</sup> The state prevented councils from building social housing to replace the stock that was being sold off. Rising demand for housing pushed prices up. Housing became increasingly unaffordable for huge swathes of the population and many were condemned to languish for years on council housing waiting lists. Those who remained council tenants tended to be poorer and in the worst quality housing. Over the years, local governments stopped maintaining to a good standard the council properties that remained, so that they would fall into ruin and then be 'condemned' and demolished. Private contractors would then get contracts to build new houses that would contain a high ratio of privately rented flats. This is still ongoing, and has been part of a 'regeneration' policy that aimed to replace the existing council states with new public/private-owned estates.

well-off workers to become property owners. At the same time, it was a most important tool for the ghettoisation of the poor and the transformation of many council estates into dilapidated 'no-go' areas. With the acceleration of globalisation, ongoing migration, especially from former colonies and Eastern Europe, has brought growing numbers of dispossessed to big cities. The new waves of immigrants were typically channeled into those very neighborhoods where opportunities and resources have been steadily diminishing, since in these areas housing is cheaper. In those areas, they could also more easily gain a foothold in the informal and entrepreneurial sectors of the economy and be supported by compatriots or co-ethnics. This ghettoisation, accompanied by a whole array of 'social and community services' / policing, would either render the dispossessed 'useful' by steering them onto the track of deskilled employment, or warehouse them in the sink estates.<sup>7</sup> Gentrification accentuated the social and spatial polarisation of the cities, since the land in many inner city areas, especially in London, was too valuable to be left to the poor (in London, gentrification processes started with the regeneration of the traditionally working class Docklands and afro-Caribbean Notting Hill in the '80s, to proliferate in a number of different areas during the '90s and 2000s). It has rapidly transformed these areas and further disintegrated local working class communities. Not only have low-income residents been pushed away or squeezed into dilapidated estates by steep rent increases, but also the number of evictions of shops that used to serve a working class clientele, the policing of those areas to restrict street life, combined with the housing benefit cuts, have reached class cleansing levels.<sup>8</sup> Located at the historically socially mixed and diverse geography

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<sup>7</sup> The whole process of dismantling social housing carries its own contradictions: on the one hand capital / the state would rather those council estates did not exist but be replaced by privately owned housing, on the other hand they have been necessary for the social reproduction and policing of (surplus) proletarian populations.

<sup>8</sup> Take for example Hackney: entire streets have been transformed in a matter of 1–2 years. Hackney is the second poorest council in the country, with over 11,000 residents living on benefits. At the same time, a small one-bedroom flat costs something like £300,000 to buy or £1,000 to rent, as middle-class families move into the area, and expensive cafes and overpriced organic takeaways

of the British cities, these processes shaped the characteristically disperse and diffuse character of the ghetto in Britain.

The trends that replaced welfare with the obligation of workfare and the hypertrophy of the police/surveillance state are two complementary developments. The utility of the punitive apparatus in the era of workfare and precarisation has been on the one hand to bend refractory parts of the working class into the discipline of the new fragmented service wage-labour by increasing the cost of exiting into the informal economy of the street, and on the other to warehouse and control those rendered superfluous by the labour market's recomposition. The introduction and continuous refinement of disciplinary workfare programmes applied to the unemployed, the indigent, single mothers, disabled and others 'on benefits', and the deployment of an extended police and penal net across cities, have been two components of a single apparatus for the management of poverty. At the same time, the traditional business, shopping and entertainment districts and the newly gentrified areas ought to remain glamorous and unspoiled by the undesirable presence of the dangerous classes. Over the last decades, there has been a proliferation of laws, bureaucratic and technological innovations: crime-watch groups and volunteer community police officers; partnerships between the police and other public services (schools, hospitals, social workers, etc.); fast-track judicial processing; stop-and-search operations;<sup>9</sup> video surveillance cameras

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spring up like mushrooms among one-pound shops. Cheap Caribbean grocery stores have been replaced by boutiques; barbers (an important meeting place for afro-Caribbean communities) by expensive trendy bars; kebab shops and cabs by fancy restaurants and modern furniture stores; butchers by delicatessens and estate agents. City squares have turned into 'plazas', designed in a way that disallows hanging out and street drinking. For the evicted small shop owners this has meant abrupt, devastating proletarianisation. For their punters and local working class social networks this meant less space, being unable to afford their neighbourhood, and being looked down upon by middle-class newcomers.

<sup>9</sup> Stop-and-search under the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act of 1994 was introduced for football hooligans and allows the police to search anyone in 'designated' areas without grounds for suspicion. Stop-and-search incidents increased from 7,970 in 1998 to 149,955 in 2009, while between 2005 and 2009 the number of searches of blacks rose over 650%, unrelated to football. It is also worth adding here the outraging figures that, since 1998, 333 deaths have

and computerised mapping of offenses; enlargement and technological modernisation of prisons; multiplication of specialised detention centers.<sup>10</sup> At an ideological level a punitive approach to social behaviours was promoted and new social types emerged: 'feral youth', 'scum' and 'yobs'. At an early stage of its development, the punitive management of poverty ended up in a burst of a small wave of rioting in deprived urban areas in the early '90s (as in Bristol in 1992), which continued as sporadic incidents of conflict between the dangerous classes and the police over the years (the most eminent incidents were the race riots in Bradford and Leeds in 2001); this very trend was reinforced by these conflicts being managed as aspects of 'antisocial behaviour'.<sup>11</sup>

### In the Whirlwind of the Crisis: Lumpenisation of the Wage Relation

So, the making of the dangerous classes in the diffuse British ghetto, whose modality of reproduction has been that of *inclusive exclusion* (the transition from labour power to variable capital, or in other words from

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occurred in police custody (Independent Police Complaints Commission), and since 1990, 1,433 people have died either in police custody or following other contact with the police (950 deaths took place in custody, 317 following a police pursuit, 112 were the result of a road traffic incident involving a police vehicle and 54 were police shootings), a quarter of them in London (*The Guardian*, data by Inquest).

<sup>10</sup> By the end of 2011, the number of prisoners in the UK reached 87,000. Every year, around 100,000 people are convicted to community work. Practical consequences of being convicted in the UK: The employer has the right to ask for access to one's criminal record, and turn down applicants with prior convictions. Convicted students can lose access to the health services and can even be expelled from their school. At the same time, those coming from outside the EU have serious difficulty in renewing their visas, while everyone faces obstacles in accessing credit. It is obvious that the criminalisation of poverty adds one more active factor to its self-reproduction, while at the same time it seeks to create a 'sanitary zone' around it.

<sup>11</sup> For more on these riots, ghettoisation and the penalisation of poverty, see Wacquant, *The Return of the Repressed: Riots, 'Race' and Dualization in Three Advanced Societies*, 1993/2007.

being a proletarian to being a worker, produced as problematic), has been intrinsic to the disconnection between valorisation and proletarian reproduction in the development of restructured capitalism, as the flip side of an increased profitability and the creation of new middle strata out of the disintegrated traditional working class. The restructuring resulted in an accentuated social polarisation. On the one hand, many enjoyed a significant social mobility, within an all the more flexible and competitive labour market, principally through the remodeled education system, and were able to enjoy relatively good incomes in skilled jobs in the service sector and easy access to credit. On the other, the increasing number of urban poor would mostly make ends meet in a constant move between low-paid crap jobs and the informal economy (various exchange activities, petit criminality, local gangs), vocational training, pay day loans and the shrinking and transformed but still existing welfare system. In this context, further education would maintain a prospect of a more secure survival on wage earning activities, while some could hope to get themselves out of the shithole working hard to find a place in higher education (an aspiration that became more and more distant after the introduction of university tuition fees in 1998 and their increase in 2004).<sup>12</sup> But there is no healthy equilibrium state, no 'normal', fully functional condition at the core of capitalist society. The contradictions of restructured capitalism exploded on a global scale in late 2007. To understand the August unrest in its historical specificity we cannot dismiss the turning point that was the burst of the capitalist crisis. The riots last summer were not just the repetition on a larger scale of the pattern of ghetto riots that this country saw during the '90s or early 2000s. The capitalist crisis, having started as a housing bubble and a slump in the financial sector in 2008, has been transformed into a global recession and a severe sovereign debt

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<sup>12</sup> In 1998 students were required to pay up to £1,000 a year for tuition and fees were means-tested. Later, means-testing was abolished and everyone was obliged to pay fees by means of loans from the state. In 2004 the government increased the level of tuition fees that universities were allowed to charge, to £3,000 a year. By 2010, maximum fees had increased to £3,290. Tuition fees were tripled to up to £10,000 a year with the higher education reform in 2010, which sparked the student movement.

crisis, without any indications of an imminent recovery on the horizon. At a strategic level, the bourgeoisie—with all its internal conflicts—is struggling to preserve the present (highly financialised) mode of global accumulation by accelerating the core dynamics of restructured capitalism itself, aiming at increasing the rate of surplus value. The crisis of overaccumulation, which in abstract terms means that there are at the same time too many workers and too many factories, is concomitantly a *crisis of proletarian reproduction*. Of course, every capitalist crisis is a crisis in the reproduction of labour power, but the historical novelty of this crisis is that the wage demand had already become asystemic in the preceding period of prosperity. The effort to increase the rate of exploitation, in itself very doubtful whether it can restore the production of adequate surplus value without a massive devalorisation of capital, accelerates all the contradictory dynamics of restructured capitalism, those very dynamics that resulted in the current crisis. The August unrest broke out amid this whirlwind: it was a concrete manifestation in action of the crisis of proletarian reproduction, as epitomised in the specific situation of its protagonists: ‘It is, to be sure, a coincidence that these specific few days have seen at once the riots, the lowering of the US credit rating, and severe turbulence on stock markets. But it is not incidental’.<sup>13</sup>

Against the backdrop of conditions of recession, with a shrinking labour market, workers being made redundant, a steep rise in unemployment, a strenuous casualisation of employment contracts and creeping increase in the prices of basic commodities and (especially in inner London) rents, the transition into the period of the crisis has seen an austerity-led intensification of the attack against the wage.<sup>14</sup> For the new generation coming from the lower strata of the proletariat this is trans-

<sup>13</sup> ‘An Open Letter to Those Who Condemn Looting’, Parts I & II, *Socialism and/or Barbarism*, August 2011.

<sup>14</sup> At the level of the spectacle, a very British sort of austerity nostalgia has been rediscovered and reappropriated, as the flip side of an all-powerful social surveillance and policing apparatus. ‘Keep calm and carry on’, which has spread in the wake of the demise of the Blair-era boom on posters or other artifacts whose aesthetics refer back to the turbulent Blitz era, exemplifies the call for a stoic acceptance of the hard times ahead. See Owen Hatherley, ‘Lash Out and Cover Up’, *Radical Philosophy* no. 157, 2009.

lated into an almost outright denial of future in the most actual terms. Already a year before the riots, the official youth unemployment rate was 20.3%, which is the highest level since records began in 1992.<sup>15</sup> Over and above, the sharp increase in university tuition fees and the abolition of the EMA in 2010,<sup>16</sup> together with a further scrapping of welfare/social services (youth clubs, community centers and local health services) and the re-imposition of workfare (e.g. mandatory work experience schemes—meaning unpaid work—for one to claim jobseekers allowance), have pushed youngsters from the estates further away from the official labour market, more and more towards the highly hazardous activities of the informal sector.

In the August unrest it was all the contradictions of inclusive exclusion in the form of the ghetto—in the peculiarity of its historical formation in the British context, namely its diffuse character—that exploded: the contradiction between the retreat of welfare and the turn to workfare and the need to warehouse and manage superfluous labour power and control unemployment rates, between a highly flexible labour market with its unrestricted flow of labour power (under the banners of multiculturalism and equal opportunities) and the penal management of poverty, between consumption as a passport to personhood and exclusion from consumption, between regeneration (gentrification) and degradation. And all these contradictions exploded exactly in the face of the radical affirmation, in the unfolding of the crisis, of inclusive exclusion and precarisation. So, the August unrest produced the ghetto as a ghetto-in-crisis, itself a specific instance of the crisis of proletarian reproduction.

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<sup>15</sup> Rates of unemployment are even worse in poor areas; for example, in Tower Hamlets young adult unemployment was 27.7%, while in Tottenham there was one job opening for every 54 jobseekers. In addition, one has to keep in mind that only those claiming jobseekers allowance are counted as unemployed, not those on other kinds of benefits (e.g. income support or disability allowances) or those surviving from activities in the informal sector.

<sup>16</sup> 80% of the 650,000 high school students who used to receive the maintenance grant come from homes where household income is less than £20,800. The EMA enabled youngsters from poorer background to continue to further education and nearly a third of them to go on to higher education.



The crisis of proletarian reproduction is not a crisis of the reproduction only of the proletariat thrown into the social margins. It is a crisis of the reproduction of the proletariat as a whole. It is at the same time a squeeze and increasing insecurity of the more stable workers (as manifested in sporadic industrial disputes over the last years) and a crisis for the middle strata as well. The student movement in late 2010, and the resurgence of rioting in central London that came with it, revealed the crisis in the reproduction of the middle-strata-to-be within the development of the capitalist crisis. The temporal affinity between the student movement and the August unrest, as well as the invasion of students prepared to confront the police and smash windows into the unions' demonstration in March 2011, made evident that the youth appears as a subject of revolt, to the extent that the crisis affects first and foremost those who enter the labour market, *according to the modalities of their entrance* (it is *the future* that is principally blocked by the crisis).<sup>17</sup> The presence of school kids from 'the slums of London' within the student movement, however peripheral, created an internal contradiction, which in a few cases was manifested in confrontations between school kids and students or militants. It declared the very content of the movement (defending the right to higher education) an inanity, in that on the basis of its demand it sought to expand beyond the university (expansion was necessary for the struggle to win), but this very expansion (as it appeared in the involvement of school kids) eroded the core demand.<sup>18</sup> This internal dichotomy between students and school kids within the student movement and the latter's distance in terms of content from the August unrest reflect the *differentiated character* of the crisis of proletarian reproduction.

If the crisis of the ghetto, as manifested in the August unrest, condenses the crisis of proletarian reproduction *par excellence*, it is because the dangerous classes represent *par excellence* what has become universal *as a dynamic* for the proletariat at large: the worldwide precarisation

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<sup>17</sup> For a previous elaboration of this idea see *The Glass Floor* on the 2008 riots in Greece by Theo Cosme.

<sup>18</sup> 'Forget university, I can't even afford college anymore. Where's my future?' (from banners that appeared during the student movement).

of labour power (capital's utopia to do away with labour, which has been a defining element of the reproduction of the class contradiction within restructured capitalism and its crisis). The dangerous classes of the 21st century are not the traditionally defined lumpen-proletariat which,<sup>19</sup> as a permanent fringe of the reserve army of labour, used to live in its own world, and therefore represented from the start an 'outside' from the central capitalist relation. The new 'lumpen-proletariat' (the new dangerous classes) is encroached by the normality of the wage relation, precisely because the 'normal' proletariat is lumpenised. The crisis, on the one hand, causes an abrupt pauperisation of many workers (as is the case in the whole western world), under the burden of increased unemployment/casual employment and debt (loans which they are now unable to repay, which is aggravated by the fact that those who have mortgages cannot always claim benefits to cover their housing costs) or restriction of access to credit. Even more, though, it produces the increased lumpenisation of the proletariat itself—a lumpenisation that does not appear as external in relation to wage labour but as its defining element. Inclusion increasingly tends to be by exclusion, especially for those who are young. It is a dynamic, a continually regenerated movement. It's not only about the exclusion from the labour market, which may well apply to many, but also about the exclusion from whatever is regarded as 'normal' work, 'normal' wage, 'normal' living.<sup>20</sup>

The crisis of the ghetto as epitomising the crisis of proletarian reproduction par excellence does not mean that the proletariat is becoming the ghetto. The production of the revolution is not a question of absolute immiseration. The crisis of proletarian reproduction is differentiated which means that it is a crisis in the reproduction of each part of the proletariat depending on the modalities of its reproduction, and at the same time a crisis of the stratification within the proletariat. The latter is very important because this stratification is a hugely necessary element of the reproduction of restructured capitalism. Not only has the social ladder

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<sup>19</sup> Violent outbursts by lumpen-proletarians have been a constant theme throughout the history of capitalism.

<sup>20</sup> See Blaumachen and friends, 'The Rise of the (Non-)Subject', *Sic* no. 2.

been blocked, but everybody is being pushed downwards. This results in each part trying to erect barricades to protect their position on the ladder and prevent their downfall. This is more so for those closer to the top. The crisis in the stratification of the proletariat sharpens all its internal contradictions and conflicts. The wage relation is being more and more lumpenised indeed, but remaining a wage worker and surviving as one is increasingly posed as a pressing matter. In this context, the rioters' practices in August, as intrinsically bound to their specific situation, were at once—exactly because of the place of this specific situation within the reproduction of the class contradiction—produced as an internal distance, a *rift*, within the necessarily dominant stake of class struggles today, namely the wage demand (acting as a class).

## To be Done With the Community

What in August was immensely different from the riots back in the '80s was that the latter had an 'affirmative' dimension—rioting could be the explosive expression of a movement to end racial discrimination, the 'sus' (suspected person) laws, stop and search—i.e. a movement for a certain integration. In 2011 we did not have that; we did not have black communities struggling for integration. The '80s riots could be considered in the context of the beginning of the restructuring and the defeat of the class, Thatcher taking on and defeating the printers or the miners, but this defeat was perhaps not considered inevitable at the time. In contrast, in 2011, there was an a fortiori illegitimacy of any integrative demands. Now, one cannot 'request' (even violently) to be treated as an 'ordinary proletarian', as this has been swept away by the crisis of restructured capitalism.<sup>21</sup> Together with this horizon, it is the affirmation of the working

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, many historical riots did not involve directly making demands. The '80s riots in the UK or the Watts uprising earlier in the USA, for example, lacked any specific immediate demands, but the rioters' actions were embedded in a movement, which historically aimed at the equitable integration of blacks (as blacks) in civil society. Today, there is not such an affirmative movement.

class community as epicentre of proletarian recomposition that has been made obsolete and was revealed as such.

The working class community has never been a call to unity, but the actual space-time of proletarian reproduction outside (and closely linked to) the workplace (the factory, in its prototype), permeated by relations of solidarity and common class interests. The trajectory of this community in Britain dates back to the powerful local working-class communities usually spreading out from the surroundings of industrial districts. The working-class community has never been a revelation of an essence, but the concretisation of a specific historical existence of the class relation, when class for itself was produced as the overgrowth of class in itself. To that extent, the working class community was segregation as much as it was unity, its cohesion as a specific modality of proletarian reproduction being provided by a central figure, the white male skilled worker initially and the white male mass worker later on—class consciousness was the horizon of the overcoming of segregation/divisions (gender, race, sectors, skilled/unskilled, natives/immigrants, etc.), the horizon of a universal equality, itself produced as impossible in the impossibility of the revolution as the affirmation of the class. With the big waves of migration from the West Indies in the '40s and '50s, and other parts of the Commonwealth in the following years, there was a proliferation of local ethnic minority communities—also including new poor shopkeepers (see the various local shops and markets as places of a communal coming together)—based on shared culture, language, traditions and histories, which would offer a protective social network in the 'Mother Country'. Such proletarian communities remained significant spaces of reproduction and struggles up to the '80s, which was evident in the role they had both in the black urban riots and the miners' strike.

Local communities as spaces of concrete everyday relationships have been disintegrated, together with the liquidation of working class identity, by all the dynamics of the restructuring. Less and less can one find the feeling of belonging in a local community, the sense of affiliation, communal relationships and class solidarity, in the (penetrated by gentrification) ghettos, even if this process has been uneven. It is true

that white working class communities, and to a large extent black afro-Caribbean communities, have declined at a much faster pace, while communities of other racial/ethnic minorities (e.g. Turkish-Kurdish or Asian ones) have been more resistant to this disintegration. Ethnic networks are an important determinant of the modes of survival for the different fractions of proletarians who come from abroad—allocation of jobs, religion, mafia-run money lending—and this is reflected for example in the composition of the petit-bourgeois elements or local gangs in various neighbourhoods. But even here, local communities do not actually represent unifying spaces of proletarian reproduction and struggles, loci of an affirmative self-identification of proletarians with each other. One could probably say that the new sense of collectivity in the deprived areas is that of a collective experience of disintegration and decline. At the same time, the very notion of ‘the communities’ has been more and more integrated into the political/ideological discourse of the state to refer to managerial/administrative apparatuses—participatory decision making, local job centers and training schemes, cultural groupings, etc.—and electoral sites.

So, in the August unrest, it was not a case of communal proletarian bonds (or bonds of common racial/ethnic origins) providing the background of a proletarian subject in struggle and, in their affirmation, the content of its struggle. We should not be misunderstood; apparently, there were instances of solidarity on a local/communal level during the riots. However, this merely confirms the fact that capital can never fulfill its utopia of transforming all modes of social intercourse to pure relations between commodities. What is significant though is that rioters did not find the *raison d'être* of their actions in the affirmation of their belonging to a local community, which is also an affirmation of their class belonging. It is indicative that the unrest traveled rapidly from one area to the next, unlike the riots in the '80s, when the battles were focused on defending a specific area against the police, which was the defending of the local community, the ‘us’ as the defining element of an affirmative movement against racial discrimination and police repression.

Whenever there was an attempt to affirm a common belonging to a local community during or after the August unrest, it was only against the very content of the unrest itself. The notion of local communities was, on the one hand, part of the repressive language of the state, aiming at addressing the objective unease of the middle classes and *petit-bourgeoisie*, as well as the discourse of local community leaders and bourgeois or *petit-bourgeois* elements feeling let down by the short-lived inability of the state's repressive apparatus to protect property. On the other hand, it was part of the political language of many militants (citizens' coalitions, leftist and anarchist groups), aiming at blunting the convulsive unfolding of the unrest into a politically meaningful strategy for social change.<sup>22</sup>

### This Was Not a Movement

In the August unrest, nothing in the situation of its protagonists was worth defending: neighbourhood, residency, community, ethnicity and race, were all revealed as aspects of capital's reproduction, which produces these proletarians as actual paupers: their class belonging was made an external constraint, an ever more pressing imperative of discipline, submission and acceptance of mistreatment without any offsetting guarantee of an acceptable survival. The language of the riots was not the positive language of the 'movement', social change, demands or politics,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 'However, a riot destroys what little we have in terms of our community assets, it also places the rioters, as well as bystanders at great risk. ... Burning, destruction, and putting the lives of members of our community at risk is not the way to express your legitimate anger at being left behind in the boom years and expected to pay with your future when the economy crashed. You are capable of more imaginative and more effective ways of demanding economic and social justice' (Leaflet by Hackney Unite). 'Our communities need a united response to both the riots and the causes of despair and frustration that can result in riots' (A North London Unity Demonstration).

<sup>23</sup> It is a mistake to claim that there were 'implicit demands', in the sense that demands may not have been articulated, but in later interviews with young rioters, many said that it happened as a result of the cuts, unemployment, policing,

but the negative language of vandalism. What happened was a lot of destruction, nothing was built, no plans, no strategies. The unrest was a 'fuck you all' to 'respectable society'. This very dynamic of the unrest, intrinsically bound to the place of the specific situation of its protagonists within the reproduction of the class contradiction, was at the same time its limit, which was revealed in the lack of any perspective for generalisation and was immanent to each one of its practices.<sup>24</sup>

Probation offices, courts and job-centres were attacked as symbols of the penal management of poverty. Expensive cars, restaurants and commercial properties were destroyed because they represent a wealth which is inaccessible. Estate agents saw their windows smashed because they represent unaffordable rents in areas being gentrified. Pawnshops were smashed as 'the kind of cunts who'll charge you twenty quid to cash a Housing Benefit cheque'. The indisputable limit of this kind of destructive activity was that it could in no way be an activity of actual *negation*, that is, a removal of the social relations that in reality sustain what was attacked.

In the shooting dead of Mark Duggan and the attacks against the cops that followed, police were revealed as the last word in the self-presupposition of capital, which for the unrest's protagonists is the guarantor of their specific modality of reproduction (inclusive exclusion), an enemy in itself, to the extent that the moment of repression is becoming more

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etc. If young hoodies talked about what they considered as some of the causes of their actions, this only proves that they are not feral idiots, as presented by the media. This is not making 'implicit demands'.

<sup>24</sup> Due to the diffuse character of the unrest, it is impossible to estimate how many people were involved in total. Unfortunately, the only available source of information in terms of total numbers is the various state-commissioned articles, studies and reports. According to the Sunday Times of 21st August 'police are seeking 30,000 rioters' and according to the Guardian 'up to 15,000 people took to the streets in August'. In most epicentres of the unrest, a few hundred people would actively participate, although there were a lot of people hanging around watching the events, in many cases passively supporting what was happening, or at least hindering the efforts of the police to gain control. In a few cases, the number of rioters was bigger, such as in Tottenham, Hackney, Salford, Birmingham and Manchester (crowds of more than 1,000 people appeared in these cases).

and more central within the reproduction of the class contradiction (the role of the police itself to prevent the non-rule-abiding reproduction of the proletariat). Exactly because of this specific relation of the dangerous classes with the police state, the targeting of the police as an enemy in itself tended to substitute the moment of repression within the presupposition of capital for the relation of exploitation itself. This makes a point of departure out of what is only a result. In revealing the cops as an enemy in itself, what becomes obscured is the fact that they are only the bourgeoisie in fighting position.

Looting was undoubtedly the predominant practice and the most outrageous scandal in the unrest. With approximately 2,500 shops looted, the scale of looting characteristically makes the August unrest outstanding. In all its manifestations—appropriating high value goods (e.g. electronics and jewelry) mainly for re-sale; looting garment stores, supermarkets and other high street shops for ‘personal’ use; storming bookmakers and pawnshops for money; or appropriating low value stuff such as cigarettes, water and alcohol for sharing among peers in the street—looting was a practical questioning of the terms of inclusive exclusion. In no case were retail shop fronts smashed as a mere symbolic action. People did not want just to ‘send a message’ but to get stuff they needed, or get money in order to buy stuff. Against the backdrop of the absence of demands, rioters directly claimed and re-appropriated means of subsistence which they are excluded from, and this was their main target. Appropriation of goods or money was a transient practical critique of the commodity form, as those proletarians offensively took what they need but are objectively banned from acquiring, and in this respect the act of looting was just as important as the loot.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Let’s not mince words. The great Catford loot was funny as fuck. Shopping at Argos will never seem the same again. Hundreds of local people were out on the street, with the mood varying from elation, barely disguised amusement and occasional tut-tutting as people of all ages struggled home with wide screen tellys. For ages there wasn’t a copper in sight. The discerning looters in JD Sports were trying things on before deciding which pair of trainers to take home. The smell of skunk hung heavy in the air. All it needed was a sound system and the carnival atmosphere would have been complete. The looting of Blockbusters



In the appropriation of goods, rioters momentarily questioned the commodity form but did so only at the level of exchange because this was the scope of their revolt. By definition, their practices could not have questioned the commodity form at the point of its genesis, namely the sphere of production. This could only end up in the affirmation of exchange itself in the very act of reselling appropriated goods or in the appropriation of money, the form of value par excellence. Understanding looting in that way does away with a frustratingly moral discourse that emerged after the riots among militants who are always seeking to water proletarians with class consciousness, a discourse aligned in the last instance with the state's repressive monologue. Quite a few protested against what was perceived as individualistic behaviour, a symptom of the so-called consumerist degenerations of the class, saying that 'they have no right to do this, this isn't how one protests'. As somebody said, of course they had no right to do this and it is for that reason that it was not a protest.<sup>26</sup> This moral critique at its best would excuse the appropriation of low value commodities (stuff that people 'really need') but condemn the appropriation of stuff that is considered luxuries or money itself, suggesting that proletarians thrown into social margins should only aspire to goods that correspond to their marginal position. Looting as the practical critique of the commodity form at the level of exchange is not the abolition of the commodity form. For looting for sale to be overcome, the existence of exchange has to be widely questioned in a generalised communising struggle. Insofar as exchange is the only means of reproducing oneself, one can only expect individual consumption and resale to be the prominent aim of the appropriation of goods. This is not fortunate or unfortunate, this is how it is.

In the actions that appeared during the unrest, the 'gang' offered the elemental organisational form, in all its fluidity and ephemerality, not only in the sense of the participation of gangs strictly speaking, but

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was not so successful. The playstation boxes turned out to be empty as were the DVD cases that ended up littering the pavement. Discarded electrical goods were also amongst the debris, their value abruptly wiped out in the free for all. The act of looting was just as important as the loot.' Johnny Void, *Rioting for Fun and Profit*, August 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Socialism and/or Barbarism*, 'Open Letter'.

mainly as informal groupings in the street, stemming from pre-existing direct relationships between peers or schoolmates, usually on the basis of residential proximity or randomly formed in the street to carry out specific actions only to dissolve soon after. But one must not forget that petit-criminality and gang activity have a significant role for many youths in the ghetto to make ends meet. The involvement of actual gangs of youngsters in the riots, although minoritarian,<sup>27</sup> questioned the function of gangs as business organisation, because the diffusion of criminality in the form of attacks against private property was a questioning of gang activity as organised crime. Since the primary purpose of gangs is to make money from selling drugs, riots are the last thing they want. You can't sell drugs when there's a riot because there are cops everywhere. For the younger members who make a few tenners a day selling drugs, participation in looting was pretty attractive, while for those higher up, the upheaval and pervasive police presence inhibited true profitable activity, the drug trade. The temporary questioning of the workings of gangs as business organisations was reflected in the fact that for four nights in August, they suspended any ordinary hostilities between each other to focus on common actions. Strict territorial divides preventing young people from slipping into 'rival areas'—sometimes defined by postcode—were temporarily forgotten. But, of course, although the involvement of gang members in the unrest created a dichotomy between gang as an affiliation group (everyday relationships of support, micro-identities hostile to the police and 'the system'—although heavily mediated by machismo, an aggressive masculinity and many times outright idiocy) and gang as a business organisation, the latter was re-affirmed in the affirmation of exchange as the limit of looting (apparently gang channels were used for the re-sale of appropriated goods), and with the unrest subsiding, a perceived collective strength fell apart back to 'business as usual', without leaving any enduring bonds behind.

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<sup>27</sup> Clearly, the state and the media used the involvement of gang members (in the strict sense) in the unrest to facilitate their ideological attack against the riots, presenting the latter as organised crime. After initially claiming that as many as 28% of those arrested in London were gang members, the police later revised the figure to 19%, a figure that dropped to 13% countrywide.

The 'us' of the riots in August was a transient and volatile 'us', created in the actions of the proletarians involved, initially defined by the very act of shooting Mark Duggan dead by the police as the culmination of the ongoing experience of military urbanism, only to dissolve thereafter as the shockwaves of the unrest subsided. There was no organisational continuity or prospect of building a movement. By revealing their class belonging as an external constraint, as capital's horizon, the unrest's protagonists found themselves in conflict with society itself, which having been really subsumed by capital is only capitalist society. This was the anti-social character of the unrest. They engaged in a convulsive activity which had an end date, and—in the radical absence of politics—plans and strategies, issues of expansion, building links or embracing 'the people' were not posed at all. Whoever was prepared to join would be part of an 'us' momentarily constituted against 'them', the police, the state, the government, the rich, shop owners, society. In the August unrest, the issue of the generalisation of the struggle was posed only in its negative, as a lack of any perspective of generalisation. The issue of the generalisation of the struggle is not posed in terms of the recomposition of the proletarian community, but in terms of the multiplication of rifts within what has become the limit of class struggle, namely acting as a class.

## The Era of Riots

With respect to its practices (its content), the August unrest was the third major instance in a series of events in Europe, the other two being the riots in the French banlieus in 2005 and in Greece in 2008. The particular unfolding of the events in each one of these instances was shaped by the respective position of each state within the global zoning of capitalist accumulation and (clearly interrelated with the latter) its specific history of class struggles, as well as the temporality of the burst and development of the capitalist crisis: in the case of France the crisis was only anticipated while in late 2008 it had just erupted. Both in France and Britain, where the population is much more diverse and there are more profoundly established class and social divides, which means that the crisis

of proletarian reproduction is much more differentiated, the ghetto was the undisputed protagonist of the riots. In Greece, on the other hand, a socially quite broader figure of school kids were the ones that pushed the riots forward in coming together with a strong activist milieu (a coming together that made many activists question for a few days their activism and alternativism) and other young precarious proletarians.<sup>28</sup> Only on this ground did the outcasts—recently arrived migrants inhabiting central Athens, hooligans and junkies—find themselves involved in the most scandalous aspects of the events, namely looting and arson. In France, the riots were geographically isolated in the ‘banlieues’ since the dangerous classes are spatially segregated as a result of the preceding social policies and population control strategies in the country (‘HLMs’ and ‘cités’). This maintained a ‘safety’ distance between the rioters and the rest of the population. In Greece, the social composition of the rioters and the social geography of Athens and the rest of big cities made city centers the major terrain of the encounter of subversive actions. Britain’s model of social integration has resulted in a geographically diffuse ghetto, which in the current temporality in the development of the crisis provided the inflammable material for the riots to spread quickly all over London and for the characteristically larger scale of looting compared to both France and Greece. But despite all their respective particularities, or better exactly within these particularities, in all three instances the protagonists of the riots revealed and attacked class belonging as an external constraint in an outburst of destructive activity which sought to negotiate or defend nothing, and this was bound to their specific situation and its place in the modalities of the reproduction of the proletariat in each respective case.

So, as an instance in these series of events, the August unrest finds itself within the era of riots, the present moment that defines the transitional period of the crisis. But this present moment could not be understood,

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<sup>28</sup> Kids came from families of Greek workers, petit-bourgeois or middle strata and second generation, integrated, mainly Balkan, immigrants. It’s worth not forgetting that the teenager shot dead by the police—which was the trigger of the riots—came from a middle class white Greek family residing in a wealthy suburb of Athens.

in the way it is particularised in the first zone of capitalist accumulation, without taking into consideration the significance, within it, of the 'indignados' or 'occupy' movements, as appeared mainly in Spain, Greece and the US. The latter have been constitutionally linked to the pushing downwards/ proletarianisation of the middle strata (or middle-strata-to-be) and as such were defined by inter-classism. This was expressed in their democratic discourse, either in the form of an appeal for real/direct democracy, as was the case in Spain and Greece, or in that of the 99% as in the US. The real democratic discourse in Spain, the direct democratic discourse in Greece or the 99% discourse in the US were an effort to affirm a common belonging (the vast majority of society; the citizen, not the proletarian) in the face of the absence of the ground for the affirmation of class belonging within the objective reproduction of the class contradiction. It sought to affirm the universality of the effects of the crisis as a universal community of struggle. The broadness of this belonging stemmed from and reinforced the inter-class/democratic character and to a large extent posed financial capital and its political functionaries as the opponent 'class' (it was the Wall Street in the 'imperialist' US or principally foreign financial capital in 'anti-imperialist' Greece).

Faced with the generalisation of the crisis of proletarian reproduction and the intensification of the dynamics of the restructuring, protesters could not practically find any way out, any concrete way in which their lives could be different. Engaged in a struggle waged at the level of politics, the 'indignados' or the 'occupiers' put forward (real/direct) democracy as representing their aspirations for a better life, but which was a mere form in the absence of the content of an alternative way of living and reproducing oneself. In that sense, the democratic discourse of the 'indignados/occupy' movements was not the radical democratism of the '90s and early 2000s, the radical democratism of the antiglobalisation movement. Now there were no visions for an alternative society, for a capitalism with a human face. The fact that they were waged at the level of politics (their democratism) was the absolute limit of the 'indignados/occupy' movements, a limit which in Greece was questioned by proletarian violence during the general strikes and in the US by calls to occupy

everything and the invasion of the ports, only to reaffirm itself as the abrupt end of the movement in Greece and the alternativism (unable to materialise itself as such) of the communes in the US, sanctioned in both cases by the police.<sup>29</sup>

In that sense, the 'indignados/occupy' movements and the riots are the two aspects of the same crisis of reproduction. Even within the democratism of the former there was little scope for any actually negotiable demands: the voting of the new bailout in Greece was more a 'call to arms' rather than a ground for negotiation (nobody really believed that it would be withdrawn), while the multiplicity of micro-demands put forward by activists in the US only reflected the absence of negotiable stakes that could be pursued. Or it would be more accurate to say that it was exactly the crisis of struggling for immediate demands that brought forth (real) democracy and it was the real democratism of the movements that made the search for demands necessary. In the 99% discourse there was an illusory aspiration for an oncoming unity as a result of the universal character of the crisis. The eagerness to expand, to make people join was constitutional for the movement. Even the cops had to be produced as enemies in the development of the movement in the US (maybe with the exception of Oakland where the memories of the murder of Oscar Grand are still fresh), when a few months earlier in London they were presupposed as such. On the other hand, the riots in Britain were produced as the total negation of any positive prospect, either in the form of real democracy or the communes. The August unrest had announced the 99% discourse, expansion as unification, as bankrupt in advance. The intrusion of the riot into the square would have destroyed any illusions of unity under the banner of democracy.<sup>30</sup> But reversely, the August unrest

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<sup>29</sup> See 'The 'indignados' Movement in Greece', *Sic* no. 1, November 2011.

<sup>30</sup> It is important that in New York the ghetto remained in the ghetto; they did not find themselves in the square. Only a few paupers in the most literal sense, namely homeless or beggars, found themselves in the occupation, more in a charity-like interaction (provision of food and shelter), and even this very fact caused tensions within the camps, as filth, alcohol and non-participation in the commons (what was called opportunism) were hostile to the political character

acquires a historical significance only in relation to the 'indignados/occupy' movements. Only in this relation was class belonging revealed and attacked as an external constraint, within class struggle today as a totality.

The rioters' practices in August were produced as an internal distance, a rift, within the necessarily dominant stake of class struggles today, namely acting as a class. This internal distance penetrates all the major current revindicative struggles. We could say that the riot invades the movement. This has been the case in France, Britain, Italy, Spain and most recently Canada (it is important that in all these movements the youth, students or young unemployed, are produced as a subject of revolt, because as we've said it is the youth that first and foremost see their future blocked). Riots invade the movements because of the inability of struggles over immediate demands to renew their revindicative dynamic (the case of the student movement in Quebec is very indicative in that respect), and in that sense we are talking about the era of riots. This encounter between the riot and the movement reached a state of paroxysm in the osmosis of practices within an inter-class crowd that appeared in Athens on 12 February, because of the acuteness of the crisis in Greece: in a massive outburst of rioting that followed a 48-hour general strike with minimal participation, 'those who are already trapped in the precarity-exclusion continuum invaded a movement that still tends to invoke 'normal' employment and a 'normal' wage; and the (non-)subject's invasion was successful, because the movement had already been invaded by capital's continual assault on 'normal' employment and the

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of the movement. The disgust of the middle strata for their proximity with the lowest ones was even more central a dynamic in Santa Cruz. In Oakland, on the other hand, the geographical proximity of the camp with the ghettos and the radical class struggle tradition of the city brought quite a lot dispossessed in the square, with a double effect: the cops were on the opposite side of the barricade by definition; the participation of the more marginalised strata from the ghettos was defused by black civil society organisations which have a significant influence on black or brown populations, committed in a transfer of radicalism from one generation to the next (for more on the Oakland commune and the occupy movement see 'Under The Riot Gear', *Sic* no. 2).

‘normal’ wage’.<sup>31</sup> This osmosis reproduced the internal distance between practices at another level, between the mass that confronted the police and those who torched buildings and looted. In all the instances of the movement being invaded by the riot, the production of class belonging as an external constraint affirms the police as what tends to become a central moment in the reproduction of the contradiction between classes.

The era of riots is at the same time the dynamic and the limit of class struggle in the current conjuncture, namely the production of class belonging as an external constraint in the face of the inability of class struggle to conclude its class dynamic and produce a renewed position of proletarian power. It is only a transitory phase in the development of this contradiction (the contradiction between classes in the current cycle of struggles) that seeks a resolution. As the crisis progresses, the proletariat struggles for its reproduction as a class and at the same time is confronted with its own reproduction (class belonging) externalised as a constraint in capital, i.e. it struggles at the same time for and against its own reproduction.<sup>32</sup> The generalisation of the struggle is not posed today as class unity (under the wings of a central figure), because for the proletariat being and acting as a class only means being a part of capital and reproducing itself as such (together with the opponent class). There is no ground for a revolutionary affirmation of class belonging, no workers’ identity or proletarian community, and there is nothing to be liberated, no craftsmanship or human nature. In an environment that produces surplus populations and violently attacks the historically defined value of labour power, anchoring on the wage relation is lost together with the ability to demand better living standards. The much-anticipated Subject loses the ground beneath its feet. The ephemeral ‘us’ of the rioters, this transient subject of destructive practices that appears momentarily only to rapidly dissolve, is the impossibility of a permanence of the Subject (the impossibility to imagine the revolution as the result of an ‘accumulation’ or overgrowth of riots). In the differentiated character of the crisis

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<sup>31</sup> Blaumachen and friends, ‘The Rise of The (Non-)Subject’, *Sic* no. 2.

<sup>32</sup> See the Introduction to *The Transitional Phase of the Crisis: The Era of Riots* by Woland, September 2011.



of proletarian reproduction, the *crisis of the stratification of the proletariat*, each part is struggling to defend its respective level of reproduction (its position on the social ladder) while they are all pushed downwards. This makes the issue of the generalisation of the struggle an issue of conflictual encounter between different practices. This is revealed in all the cases of riots invading movements. It is what was anticipated in the aforementioned dichotomy within the student movement in 2010, which was very similar to the one that had appeared within the anti-CPE movement in France in 2006. It is what was also prefigured when the encounter between the rioters and the petit-bourgeois poor was posed as conflictual in the August unrest (when shopkeepers—themselves to a large extent exploited by serfdom-like bonds to various ethnic mafias—defended their shops in many times armed), in the absence of a unifying common belonging to a local community.<sup>33</sup>

What seems to be absent from the invasion of the riot into the movement, as it appears in the current conjuncture in the first zone of capitalist accumulation, is the struggle in the workplace. In the movement over pensions in France, where a large number of workers participated, there was no major wave of strikes. The movement's connection with the workplace was mainly expressed in the form of the blockade (blockades

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<sup>33</sup> In that sense the attempt for a reconciliation of opposing interests between rioters and small shop-owners by the Turkish and Kurdish communities of North London against police repression in the aftermath of the events is a political attempt to resolve a contradiction which cannot have a political resolution: 'Let's not forget that the Turkish and Kurdish youth are also a part of the youth in this country and therefore Turkish and Kurdish youth and their future are also at stake as a result of such cuts. ... We are witnessing the development of an instinctive tendency to protect their small shops and at times attacking the youth. Surely the traders have the right to protect their shops. But such events should not be ... used to strengthen the prejudices that the oppressed and migrant communities have against each other'. These interclass fraternity call sought to substitute a 'community of the poor' for what only the direct attack at the means of production and subsistence can achieve: the confrontational posing at stake of the coming together of different parts of the proletariat and poor small proprietors. At any rate, a 39-year-old mother among the rioters stated: 'We won't shed any tears for the shops; they never contributed to the community, now they only care about their middle-class hipster customers.'

of refineries). Similar was the case in the US, when the occupy movement saw the step forward in blocking ports in the West coast, while during a week of workplace occupations in the public sector in Greece last autumn, occupiers were very careful not to be strikers (nobody was really prepared to lose their wages). The posing of the contradiction between classes in this cycle of struggles at the level of their mutual reproduction is in the present moment unable to cross the barrier of production, namely enter the field which is at the core of this mutual reproduction, as, in the face of the precarisation (lumpenisation) of the wage relation, being a proletarian today is not identified with being a worker and even those who are actually workers do not identify in any positive way with the condition of being a worker. This has in a way been expressed in scattered factory occupations over redundancies and compensations in Europe during the last few years, which as such are a flight from the workplace, from the worker's condition (itself a moment of the production of class belonging as an external constraint). In the absence of struggles or actions that will put the production of value at stake and their relating to them, those who find themselves reproduced in the modality of inclusive exclusion will be unable to question the dependence of their survival on activities of exchange, as became evident in the August unrest. However, in the practices of blockading, in the invasion of 'outsiders' into workplaces, two important issues arise: a) putting value production at stake will not necessarily take the form of the strike (which does not mean that strikes will not happen, but that the crucial significance of productive labour is not posed anymore as the centrality of the figure of the productive worker); b) the practices of blockading anticipate the practical questioning of self-organisation in the conflictual encounter between workers and 'outsiders', to the extent that this invasion will tend to question the privileged relation of certain workers with the specific means of production they work with.

The capitalist crisis is a flight forward, an acceleration of all the dynamics of the restructuring. It is a radical affirmation of the illegitimacy of the wage demand amidst the unraveling of guarantees for survival, the proletarianisation of middle and petit-bourgeois strata and the accentuation of the production of surplus populations. The attack against the price of

labour power is crystallised as austerity measures (similar to the structural adjustment programmes of the '80s) that are now implemented everywhere in the first zone of capitalist accumulation (the supervisors of this process are Moody's and Standard & Poor's). As this process develops amidst a severe sovereign debt crisis in Europe, the implementation of austerity in the South is of utmost priority not only for the PIIGS (austerity is the mechanism of the restructuring which mystifies itself in the coercive language of access to international financial markets), but for the core states as well, in order to prevent the acute devaluation of their own financial assets, which would rapidly send them deeper into recession, making contradictions in the internal front even more explosive (somebody called that uneven de-development at a discussion in London). Amidst the whirlwind of intensified intra-capitalist competition, the multiplication of proletarian struggles and riots, the police is everywhere affirmed as a central moment in the reproduction of the contradiction between classes, as exemplified in the banning of protests in the US and Spain, with new laws voted following the 'occupy' movement and the appearance of riots in Barcelona, in the recent emergency law in Canada, brought into action when riots invaded the student movement, or in the army taking to the streets in Italy and the new detention camps for illegal migrants in Greece. In Britain, the August unrest was followed by around 5,000 arrests and legal modification that led to hugely increased sentences for riot participants. Apart from the publication of various studies on the events and the shortcomings of the state's response which explored ways of preventing similar unrests in the future, a number of committees and bodies announced that widespread riots are quite likely to erupt again and have been working hard to supply the state's arsenal with more effective ways of dealing with similar unrests.<sup>34</sup> The form of the ghetto, of intensified spatial seg-

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<sup>34</sup> Police should consider using live ammunition to halt attacks on buildings when the lives of those inside might be at risk. The use of 'protected' vehicles advancing against rioters, rubber bullets, water cannons and military backup were also suggested. On the occasion of the Olympics, the technological repressive arsenal of the state is being reinforced as well, with new face recognition cameras and other gadgets, while the condition of the army patrolling in the streets is being normalised.

regation secured by innovated surveillance methods, police special forces or even the army, is anticipated as the dominant modality of reproduction for rapidly increasing proletarian populations, a trend that has been more advanced in the US. The recently voted for housing benefit cap and the massive ‘regeneration’ of the traditionally poor districts in East London on the occasion of the Olympics, which cause a renewed social cleansing, point to this direction in Britain. In these trends as well as in the cases of technocrats being directly appointed as heads of the state to temporarily relieve serious political crises, as has recently been the case in Greece and Italy, a tendency towards totalitarianism is evident, which, not being though in any case an incorporation of the working class into the state across national lines, is not a repetition of the historical totalitarianisms of fascism and Nazism (historical repetitions are without meaning anyway).

Of course, all of the above dynamics that increase precarisation (the lumpenisation of the wage relation) cannot in any case resolve the contradictions of restructured capitalism because they are these very contradictions the ones that led to the current crisis, and are themselves already in crisis as solutions. The ghetto is already a ghetto-in-crisis and the August unrest was this crisis in action. The internal distance that appears within class struggles today aggravates all social contradictions and creates a self-reinforcing process of growing conflicts—that includes more and more categories—and the intensification of state repression. As we’ve said, the dynamics of the struggle in the era of riots cannot produce any stable results. The limit of these struggles, now, is that they are class struggles. The overcoming of this limit is a practical attack against capital, which is identical with the attack on the very existence of the class of proletarians.

From demand struggles to revolution there can only be a rupture, a qualitative leap. But this rupture is not a miracle, not a change that happens in an instant, neither is it merely the realisation by proletarians that nothing else is any longer possible except the revolution, as everything else has failed. This rupture is produced positively as struggles unfold.<sup>35</sup> It

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<sup>35</sup> See *Théorie Communiste, Self-Organisation is the First Act of the Revolution; it then Becomes an Obstacle Which the Revolution has to Overcome*, 2005.

is prefigured in the multiplication of rifts within struggles. The generalisation of the struggle can only be the generalisation of practices that question proletarians' existence as proletarians. The capitalist crisis as a crisis of the reciprocal implication between classes will be the backdrop of this generalisation, and precisely because of the latter the crisis will become paroxysmal.<sup>36</sup> The generalisation of the struggle, as a coming together *of conflicts* within struggles, will immediately bring multiple aspects of surplus value production / capitalist reproduction to a halt, thus putting at stake proletarian reproduction itself, necessitating simultaneously the intensification and expansion of what will then be an open insurrection, or probably multiple insurrectionary fronts. Obviously, the coming together of proletarian practices will not be peaceful. On the contrary, we should expect a violent process in many instances. If the generalisation of rifts produces a new kind of 'unity' of practices, this will not be the old class unity, but multiple practices objectively establishing different camps within the fighting proletariat that will however be unable to crystallise (lest the revolution be defeated) into particular political forms; they will be volatile by definition, precisely because for the 'communisation camp' there won't be an end. The production of rifts is the production of class belonging as an external constraint within the class struggle. The dynamic of class struggle today can never be victorious, because it will keep finding class struggle itself as its limit, up to the point when the multiplication of rifts will become the overcoming of class belonging (and therefore of class self-organisation), as a revolution within the revolution, as communising measures, that will either de-capitalise (communise) life further and further or be crushed.

Rocamadur/Blaumachen, August 2012

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<sup>36</sup> The link between everyday struggles and the revolution ceases to be a theoretical abstraction and becomes direct in the crisis of the capitalist relation of production.





# Under the Riot Gear

We would therefore suggest that *Gemeinwesen* [community] be each time substituted for *State*; it is a good old German word that can very well do service for the French *Commune*. (F. Engels, *letter to A. Bebel concerning the 'Gotha program'*, London, March 18–28, 1875)<sup>1</sup>

Both 'war machine and care machine', the Oakland Commune extended itself over the course of five weeks and one square. Generating both surprise and admiration, it peaked with the strike of 2 November 2011. This was only the second time since 1946 that there had existed the possibility of a general strike in the US. The previous one had also taken place in Oakland.

From its inception, the Oakland Commune had to come to terms with the reproduction of the proletariat in a way that overcame the preceding struggles and the other Occupy movements. Confrontation with labour was both its peak and its swansong.

The following text is an attempt to show the contours of the camp's five weeks, as well as the days of action which followed. These are contours which underlie the limits of this struggle. Limits are always intrinsic to a movement and they are its own dynamic. One should not see them as limitations. We do not therefore intend to bring an external moral judgment to bear on the situation, but to understand the dynamics of the struggle. If we interest ourselves specifically with the Oakland Commune, it is only to the extent that, according to its specificity, it was the unfolding of a front of attack sharper than that of the other Occupy movements. At the same time, we will focus on it as a singular event which allows us to understand the general nature of Occupy and

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<sup>1</sup> Translation revised.



also, more broadly, the movement of plaza occupations. Understanding the limits of this struggle means, therefore, understanding the dynamics of a *moment* of the general crisis of accumulation. This crisis, in all of its moments, carries within itself a horizon. Within this is contained the abolition of the present state of capitalist relations: the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things', alongside its counter-revolution. Communism as the horizon of the current cycle of struggles is for us communisation, abolition of all the classes by the proletariat and communism as an immediate process. This horizon is for us neither a state of affairs which is to be established nor an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. The 'existing conditions', those of crisis and of the disciplinarisation of the proletariat, will find their abolition in the generalisation of the attacks against the limits peculiar to each movement, a generalisation that must necessarily manifest itself as a rupture with these same conditions.

### *The City*

Downtown Oakland, after having been a bastion of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, fell under the directorship of major business leaders in the 1930s. After WWII and the resulting mass immigration to the city caused primarily by the new war jobs in ports and factories, and alongside the general strike of 1946, the city witnessed the beginning of a crushing of the labour movement and the urban development of Oakland which enables us to understand the origins of the Commune.

Throughout the post-war period Blacks emigrated in the hope of finding a steady job at the same time that growing unemployment began to darken the horizon. 'In the old South blacks could be cooks and waiters but couldn't eat in public restaurants', whilst in the Bay Area, 'you could eat in the cafeteria, but you couldn't work'.<sup>2</sup> From 1962 the restructuring of the port, the replacement of a large portion of labour power with machines and the implementation of the container system created an un-

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<sup>2</sup> C. Rhomberg, *No There There. Race, Class and Political Community in Oakland*, University of California Press, p. 119. On Oakland, see first of all *American Babylon Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Robert O. Self, Princeton University Press.

skilled labour force and a surplus population. That surplus was segregated into the ghettos designed for it,<sup>3</sup> whilst at the same time, the Federal government was democratising housing for whites.

Whilst the Black population was growing in number throughout the '50s and '60s, it became enclosed within West Oakland. The white population deserted the neighbourhood; racial harassment and the beating of Blacks became a common pattern of behaviour amongst the Oakland Police Department (OPD). The renewal of the Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART, which would later connect Oakland to San Francisco via an underground network) was the final act in the destruction of any business activity in West Oakland. In 1958 the construction of the Cyprus Freeway achieved the separation of West Oakland from Downtown, displacing residents and creating a clear barrier between the two neighbourhoods. All freeway construction after this would only continue separating the city into different neighbourhoods, or, rather, to divide Oakland into ghettos and rich suburbs.

After the early '60s, the night-life had moved to San Francisco and most shops in West Oakland had closed down. As industry moved out, the area's unemployment rose to double the national average. The so-called 'war on poverty' program conducted by Lyndon Johnson, despite taking West Oakland as a case in point, did nothing to alter the exclusion of Blacks from the labour and housing markets.

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<sup>3</sup> Our apologies to any US reader who feel rubbed the wrong way by the use of the word 'ghetto' in this text, particularly to those who live in places that are described as such in the media. We by no way disregard the forms of solidarity and self-organisation that exist there and are constantly being ignored. We use this word only as a technical term that proved throughout the last 60 years to have a material ground. The use of this term does not intend its common sensationalist meaning, but to try to understand what positions some social groups are given in a class society that offers little much than absolute dispossession to the lowest classes and also to understand the long history of struggles that arose from the places where those groups have been very often forced to reside through a structure of both economical massacre, racist laws and urbanisation plans. Furthermore, we would like to add that this text was written by West Europeans. Any sombre tone about the living conditions in the poorest parts of Oakland might be due to the gigantic amounts of violence and misery that have been created there by US capital and capitalists, amounts to which some US residents might be more accustomed.

By the end of the decade the port had the second largest container capacity in the world, and the Black Panther Party was implementing, amongst other things, the free breakfast program. The organisation was born in 1967 carrying out anti-police armed protection and, up until 1972–73 when the FBI carried through the COINTELPRO program which succeeded in dissolving the party in disparate gangs focused on the self-destruction of the ghetto, was the strongest focal point for social tensions in Oakland. The existence of the party was based on a growing mass of lumpen-proletarians, partially fuelled by the return of desperate Black Vietnam veterans, and a strong armed resistance to the overtly racist and violent police department. It must be stressed that the memory of the Panthers is still shared by most people and that references to them in daily life are constant. It is also important to note that the policing of the Panthers by the OPD became a model for ghetto policing in the US.

A new Black middle class emerged from the '70s to the '90s. During that period, the number of Black professionals and managers rose from 11% to 23% of the population and by 1978 the civic authorities had passed into the hands of the Black bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, poverty and unemployment continued rising in the poorest parts of the Black population. In 1989, a quarter of all Black families lived beneath the poverty line. Alongside poverty and police repression emerged gangs, for whose members, aided by both the CIA (which emptied planes full of drugs on US territory and helped cartels set up in exchange of their support for the *contras*) and various political mafias, the main method of survival became the capitalisation of the massive influx of heroin, cocaine, and later, crack. The creation of these gangs succeeded in both the pacification of political conflicts and the institutionalisation of Black on Black murder. In other words, the ritual murder of the poorest by the poorest became, as in every other ghetto in the US, a feature of everyday life. In the same span, against the decay of the ghetto, the gang became, for those expelled from the job market, the last form of social community existing, alongside the Black Church. The history of West Oakland from the '50s to the '90s is the general history of the transformation of the 'community ghetto' into a 'hyperghetto'. What one can see now is a 'polarisation of the class

structure which, combined with ethnoracial segregation and welfare state retrenchment, has produced a *dualisation of the social and physical structure of the metropolis*.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time that the Black Panther Party was emerging, the Tax Revolt was initiated. The latter peaked with the vote of Proposition 13 in 1978, the nation's first property tax limitation. Since the '60s, work places in the region had been moving following the tax competition between different districts. As much as the emergence of a 'service sector' in the Bay area from the '70s from which Blacks were *de facto* excluded, the Tax Revolt sparked a constant attack against ghettos at all levels of administration. At the federal level, Nixon's government poured all the social housing funds into the private estate market.

From the '90s onwards, immigration increased the share of Asian and Latinos in the total population to 17% and 25% respectively. The latter found themselves largely segregated in East Oakland (although East Oakland is by far not entirely Latino and has very important Vietnamese, Black and Chinese communities), and in the last decade Latino gangs took over the drug economy of the city. The ripples of the war raging between the Norteños and Sureños, the two main US footsoldier organisations working for the Latino mafias, emerged in the form of constant local conflicts in California (which the Border Brothers are joining). Each of the principal organisations acts as a sort of family for local gangs who are forced into the defence of their territory, or 'set', against the constant incursion of rivals. In reality, for those in Latino gangs the risk of being shot makes the crossing of borders impossible. As in West Oakland, the gang is for some the only possible way to survive economically and for them one of the last forms of community that remains.

The systematic gentrification of Oakland started under the mayorship of Jerry Brown (1999–2007). Project 10K served to re-develop Downtown via the building of yuppie condos and office spaces. The project was partly halted due to the start of the crisis in the state of California, but had already left its mark on Downtown. More recently, parts of West Oakland have been colonised by cafes where lines of young creative

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<sup>4</sup> L. Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts*, Polity Press, p. 24.

hipsters, amazed by the comparatively low rental prices, can work on their projects, sipping macchiatos whilst galleries open one after the other just blocks from ongoing inter-proletarian shootings. The surrounding area was redeveloped by private companies and City Hall as in the case of Telegraph Avenue, or invented, as with 'Korean Town Northgate' (KoNo). While many interested parties seek to conquer West Oakland and its Victorian houses, East Oakland, situated far off, without a transportation system and architecturally poor, interests no-one and a West to East emigration of the poorest people seems inevitable in the next few years.

At the time of writing, official unemployment in Oakland is 16.2% (the US average is 9.1%). Youth unemployment in West Oakland is estimated at approximately 50%. Recent job growth is negative: the number of jobs in the city decreased by 2.7% in 2011. Rate of violent crimes is sixteen in every one thousand, in comparison to four in every thousand nationwide and, despite being only the eighth largest city in California, Oakland has the third highest number of homicides per year. West Oakland, still the poorest area of the city, is now 67% Black. Outside of the newly gentrified areas of the neighbourhood there are only a few liquor stores and almost no cheap grocery food is available for local residents.

The geographical proximity of West Oakland to Downtown goes a long way towards explaining the class and race constitution of the Oakland Commune. Finally, for those who are evicted from either the West or the East and become homeless, Downtown becomes, assuming one can evade the OPD, one of the safest places to try to survive. As such, for many homeless people, drug-dealers and drop-outs the plaza next to city was already a camp, or at least the main spot to hang-out both night and day, a long time before the Commune.

### *Chronology of the Movement*

- 17 September: Occupy Wall Street starts in New York and San Francisco.
- 7 October: The camp in San Francisco is destroyed by the police. Some people beyond the specific 'radical' milieu of the Bay come to support the camp and fight the cops.
- 10 October: In Oakland, a few hundred people march, tents are installed on half of the city hall square which is promptly renamed 'Oscar Grant Plaza'.
- 15 October: 2,500 people march in support of the camp. Move On, a front for the Democrat Party, tries to take over the march. The actor Danny Glover is supposed to hold a historic speech with the mayor in the middle of the square. When they arrive they are refused entry to the square by the mass of people present.
- 18 October: When the first camp is unable to take new tents, a second camp is installed in parallel at Snow Park in Downtown.
- 20 October: Eviction notice from City Hall.
- 25: In the early morning, both camps are destroyed by a police raid. 102 arrests. The following night sees hours of showdowns in Downtown. A veteran marine is wounded in the head by police arms and taken away from the streets in critical condition.
- 26 October: In the afternoon a march of 3,000 people go back to the plaza despite the police covering Downtown. Generalised antagonism towards the police as solidarity march towards jail occurs. A general assembly takes place that evening on the plaza and the general strike is voted by 1,700 people. Meanwhile, the closure of 5 schools is voted for by the district.
- 27 October: A new camp is installed on the plaza. The City Hall, wary of provoking a reaction similar to one the night before, allows it to happen.

- 29 October: March against police violence in Downtown.
- 2 November: 25,000 people march on the port and blockade it without being stopped by police. Many stores are vandalised along the route and 'flying pickets' are organised to close down businesses remaining open. Many 'anarchists' are physically attacked by 'non-violent' types. At night, an attempt to occupy a building in Downtown is attacked by the police. Street battles and barricades. 103 arrests.
- 10 November: A young man is shot on the outskirts of the camp.
- 14 November: Second police raid on the camp. This raid is in coordination with the nationwide eviction of all Occupy camps.
- 21 November: Last camp in Snow Park is evicted.
- 12 December: The day of the 'West Coast Port Shutdown'. 5,000 people participate in Oakland. Ports of Seattle, Portland and Longview are also shut down in solidarity with ILWU workers struggle in Longview.
- 28 January: 'Move in Day'. 3,000 people are present at the beginning of the day to occupy a building in Downtown. No building is occupied and 400 arrests. City Hall is ransacked.

### ***Reproduction, Camp and Piggies***

If people came to the camp at Oscar Grant Plaza, it was first and foremost for what it could offer them, i.e. food, shelter, security from the police and the chance for social interaction. The mere existence of the Oakland Commune goes against the usual cliché which insists that the revolt of the most marginalised is always the most intense, the most violent and the quickest. Equally, it opposes the other cliché that posits the most marginalised as unable to participate with other classes in a common

struggle and the opposition between the anti-CPE and the *banlieues* riots in France has become the starkest example of the binary vision through which struggles are often viewed.<sup>5</sup> This is why it is important to note the difference between the Oakland Commune and the riots of December '08 in Greece. The latter took place *at the level* of the reproduction of the proletariat, but never within it. They faced everything which constitutes the reproduction of the proletariat, but they never took it over. The questions of gender, food, housing, care and health were never even challenged and were left alone because the only form that the struggle took was a confrontation with the police. The reproduction of the proletariat was in front of the rioters, but only under the uniform of a cop. Looting was the only horizon on which to challenge it.

The Greek riots were a turning point because they sounded the beginning of a new cycle of struggle at the same time that the news of bank crashes announced a new economic cycle. Since then, revolts have deepened at the same time as has the crisis. Ultimately, for most the memories of the Oakland Commune are more about gigantic kitchens, huge general assemblies, crowds, tensions between different parts of the camp, concrete questions such as how to 'treat a wound' or how to 'bring toilets', rats, fights, brawls and dances than pitched battles against the police. The Oakland Commune, in that respect, was a turning point: the space of the struggle was no longer restricted to the face to face struggle against the police, but leapt to the face to face encounter with the reproduction of the proletariat. What the Oakland Commune confirmed was that struggles tend to unfold more and more within the sphere of reproduction. The reason behind this is because, even in countries such as Greece which, once austerity measures were enforced saw a drastic lowering of the nominal wage, the first relation of proletarians to the crisis is through the devaluation of the real wage ('real wage' in its broadest sense, i.e. taking into account all indirect wages) enacted by the dismantling of the welfare

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<sup>5</sup> The student movements in England also go against this particular grain. With tuition fees rising at the same time that family education benefits were cut, the student demonstrations were invaded by high school students claiming that they came 'from the slums of London'.



state, the uncontrolled rise of unemployment, a housing bubble due to a withdrawal of investment from production to rent, the subsequent bursting of this bubble for private credit and a rising inflation. In the US, in a context where housing credit is an essential economic consideration (in 2009, 67% of the inhabitants of a house were its owners), the crisis re-modeled class relations: houses are foreclosed one after the other.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the poorest neighbourhoods face head-on the rise of unemployment and keep on falling apart. The gentrification of certain areas must be considered alongside this dispossession. Any attempt to understand the crisis must pass through a revaluation of the real-wage and this means that it must take into account the price of rent. Michael Seidman reminds us that in 1936 the unemployed in Paris were spending 7.2% of their income on rent.<sup>7</sup> The real wage is intrinsically related to the cost of reproduction; it is not just a figure.

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The sphere of reproduction encompasses the domestic and private spheres and the individual's relation with the State. At the bottom of it, the sphere of reproduction is everything which is outside of the workplace. In it one is, theoretically, an individual, a citizen, and, as an embodiment of labour-power, always destined to find oneself in a direct confrontation with capital. Since the '70s,<sup>8</sup> a disconnection between these three modes

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<sup>6</sup> There were 1,887,777 foreclosure filings in 2011 in the US, which represent 1.45% of housing (1 out of 69). In 2010, that concerned 2.23% of the housing (1 out of 45), in 2009, 2.21% and in 2008, 1.84% (1 out of 54). California has had one of the highest rate of foreclosure since the beginning of the crisis. In Oakland 10,508 houses were foreclosed between January 2007 and October 2011. In 42% of cases, the housing was bought back by real estate investors. The price of renting per month is then about the double of the price of monthly paying back a 30 year mortgage.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Seiman, *Workers against Work. Labour in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts*, University of California press.

<sup>8</sup> It is true that any attempt of periodisation tends towards a simplification. In this fashion, the periodisation developed within the communising current is

has manifested itself in the simple fact that the latter confrontation is no longer a given and as such the individual and citizen is not necessarily at the same an incarnation of labour-power. From then on, the thing which had performed a constant mediation between the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction in as much as it constituted the domination of the latter by the former, is no longer certain, and, as such, the sphere of reproduction appears as an autonomous moment. However, this cannot be the case, as it can only exist *for* the sphere of production. It is from this point, and as a result of this restructuring, that everything which was not questioned by programmatism becomes all the more obvious:<sup>9</sup> gender, sexuality, domestic labour, housing, etc. and that struggles largely take place around those very categories via a direct confrontation with the State.

The present cycle of actual struggle is therefore simply exaggerating a general tendency of restructuring: that of the decentering of class struggle from the sphere of production to the sphere of reproduction. The Italian creeping May, followed by the *Autonomia*, were, in that respect the mark of a historical rupture. The involvement of women in the self-reduction

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very eurocentrist. Therefore the point is not to put one's finger on a precise beginning and ending date for each period, but to be able to use the identification of a period as a tool in order to understand the changes of relation between capital and labour. By *restructuring*, we therefore mean the period that goes from loosely the early '70s to nowadays, that is to say, the period in which workers' power as the driving revolutionary force is no longer possible.

<sup>9</sup> We call programmatism the period from the middle of the 19th century to the 1970s, the years of the *restructuring*. The point is not, unlike Moishe Postone, to look at this period as a mistake or as the result of a poor understanding of Marx, but as a period of the class struggle. Lenin, Makhno or Pannekoek were all programmatists. Describing the German left, Gilles Dauvé gives a precise definition of what programmatism is: 'The reality of the enterprise, as a form of production specifically capitalist, was not questioned. Thinking the abolition of economy was even less in the cards ... Self-management by the workers' councils is capital seen from the point of view of the worker, i.e. from the point of view of the cycle of productive capitalism.' (*Ni Parlement ni syndicats: les conseils ouvriers!*, new edition, Les nuits rouges, p. 6, personal translation.) It is futile to try to understand the 'mistakes' of programmatism. One now has to understand, through programmatism, how it is possible to affirm that we live in a different period.

movement; massive movements of family flat occupations; the constitution of Lotta Femminista; the post-1975 demonstrations in defence of abortion; the *Wages for Housework* movement; prostitutes' struggles and the questioning of gender itself within the *Autonomia* milieu; these were only possible once the struggles left the factory, established their autonomy vis a vis classical organisation and moved towards the recapture of the real wage.<sup>10</sup>

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It must be noted that in Oakland this tendency was and is still present. Besides the West Coast Port Shutdown, all other important developments were around the question of reproduction. These included the day of action intending to occupy a Downtown building, self organised groups of women teaching first aid treatment for knife and gunshot wounds, the May occupation of a farm belonging to UC Berkeley, the re-occupation of Lakeshore school in July and the occupation in August of an empty library in East Oakland, etc.

The question of reproduction is the only way to frame a non-reductionist understanding of the link between Oakland and the other square movements. It is true that some of the occupations partly identified themselves in opposition to a singular moment of the reproduction process (the rentier State in the Arab Spring, the austerity cuts in Greece, housing in Israel), whereas others placed themselves directly within the whole sphere of reproduction (Spain and the US). The first type could be contained, if only for a time, under a form of frontism. These fell apart as soon as the main 'demand' was realised. The fall of Mubarak or Ben

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<sup>10</sup> The occupation of Capitole plaza in Roma between 10–20 March 1970 by the Committee of Suburb Unrest can be seen as setting a distant precedent for the Occupy movement. More generally, a work of reevaluation of *Autonomia* should take place, since the main texts of the communising vulgate refer only to 'autonomy' as a very vague concept describing struggles for the autonomy of the proletariat from capital, a concept which is supposed to apply just as much to Italy in the '70s, the Direct Action Movement or the Piqueteros of Argentina—an approach that we do not consider in any way useful.

Ali turned itself into a never-ending cycle of riots, the epic battles of the Cairo Proletariat, and a wave of wildcat strikes in Tunisia. When this demand 'failed' (the voting through of austerity measures in Greece, the maintenance of the regime in Bahrain, the launching of a civil war by Ghadaffi, etc.) the movement fell apart. Spain and the US were the only two struggles that could never identify themselves under any particular demand: struggles that, as such, appeared as a pure general product of the crisis rather than one of its particular features. Nonetheless, it remains important to emphasise that all of these struggles had a common ground which consisted both of a link to the global crisis, as content of the struggle, and of the taking over the reproduction of the proletariat as a whole, as form of the struggle.

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If there is a tendency for the moment of reproduction to realise its autonomy, this must generally occur around the relation with the police. There exists a *being-together* only because all proletarians have once again become poor and their past fragmentation within different strata are dissolving. However, this bringing together is accomplished only in the moment of reproduction, and it is done without any basis other than that of discipline, and discipline is the task of the State. That is to say, it is usually the task of the police and courts. It is for this reason that the figure of the cop ends up everywhere as the figure of the principal enemy. This is not due to misunderstanding, but to a simple return of fire. This occurs as the geographical segregation within countries becomes more and more pronounced and police violence is a daily affair, and often the only relation with the State and with capital.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a more thorough development of the relation to the police and the State in the rentier State: 'Corruption is then ... a moment in the state's habitual, harassing reproduction of the mass of marginals in the restructuring Tunisian economy. Thus the increasingly particularised experience of the relationship to the state, is a universal experience of the class. One could say that in the moment of recognition that sparked the revolt, the particularisation of the individual's fate and the fragmentation of experience is understood as a class experience.'

Police violence erased some boundaries within the Occupy movement (the 700 arrests of October 1st in NYC, the pepper-spraying of a line of impassive students sitting quietly at UC Davis, the pepper-spraying of a women at a march in NYC...) and many who were considered to be 'liberals' were transformed into 'radicals' within a few days. The destruction of the camps was, in certain places, the swan-song of that particular movement, but, in many, the moment of radicalisation. Oakland was of the second category. After the camp was destroyed for the first time on 25 October—in a military style that spoke more of Fallujah than 'social dialogue'—the night brought a pitched battle between the police and people attempting to retake the plaza. Downtown streets were covered in tear-gas for hours with the cops constantly shooting rubber bullets. The marine veteran Scott Olson was wounded in the face by a tear gas canister whilst reading the first amendment to a line of police. When people throw themselves on his body in an attempt to remove him from the conflict, they too are hit with projectiles. These images, alongside the news report of Olson's critical condition and his new martyr status completely change the dynamics of the movement, as well as the general public's reaction to it. When 3,000 people meet in the afternoon in front of the Downtown library, they march to retake the plaza. After hours of struggling with the police stationed in Downtown, a general assembly takes place and a general strike is voted for. (Out of 1,700 participants only 100 voted against and 15 abstained).

The Oakland Commune's relationship to the police was, with regard to the rest of the Occupy movement, exceptional. Within the first few days the general assembly voted to keep the camp a police-free zone. Patrols took place at night to make sure that they did not come too close to the camp. As soon as a few cops would try to enter a mass of people would form and shout 'Pigs go home!' This despite the fact that cops, likely under the sway of City Hall, were aiming to avoid confrontation.

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L.S., 'Hanging by a Thread: Class, Corruption and Precarity in Tunisia', *Mute*, 17 January 2012, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/arab-revolts-column/hanging-thread-class-corruption-and-precarity-tunisia>.

It is obvious that the memory of the death of Oscar Grant provided a strong reason for this resistance.<sup>12</sup> Memorialised in the name Oscar Grant Plaza, it remains a potent symbol of one of the most notoriously violent and corrupt police department in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Of course, such things become symbolic insofar as they are representative of a banal and everyday reality.<sup>14</sup>

On top of previous factors, and the participation of people from the poorest parts of the city, should be added the part played by the 'radical' milieus in Oakland. The fact that these milieus formed almost entirely around the 2009 university occupations explains why they were able to so quickly intervene and organise within the struggle as 'affinity groups'.<sup>15</sup> Again, it is the fact that the Oakland camp emerged approximately one month after the start of Occupy New York and after the overwhelming experience of the defence of the San Francisco camp against police attack

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<sup>12</sup> The murder of Oscar Grant, executed in cold blood by the Bay Area Transportation Police on New Year's Eve 2009, while he was handcuffed, head against the ground and unarmed, played a central role in fermenting Occupy Oakland. Many riots happened the following weeks and on the night of the court verdict (the cop was sentenced to two years of jail) in July 2010. The particular nature of this murder (somehow quite banal for the Oakland Police Department or BART) came from the fact that a train full of passengers was on the other side of the platform. The videos of the murder were viewed hundreds of thousands of times in the days that followed.

<sup>13</sup> Twelve years after the dismantling of 'the Riders' and their common activity of planting fake evidence, racketing the black market and managing a part of the drug traffic, City Hall is still officially recognised as being unable to restructure the OPD, despite Juridical request. The police remain under threat of federal receivership.

<sup>14</sup> Many Californian police departments are famous for being historically constituted by Texan supremacists. Individuals who were themselves invited with due care by an overtly racist hierarchy. See the brilliant *City of Quartz* (Mike Davis, Verso) for the case of William Parker in L.A.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning these occupations see *Communique from an Absent Future* (<http://anticapitalprojects.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/communique-from-an-absent-future-on-the-terminus-of-student-life/>). Particularly in California, the occupations were an obvious precedent for the Occupy movement beyond the fact that they shared common participants.

which allowed these milieus to take some distance to organise themselves in a different way.

But one more reason must be added in order to explain the particularity of the Oakland Commune: the city mayor, Jean Quan. Representing the 'leftier' fringe of the Democratic Party, she entered politics in the '70s via Maoist groups and was in the front of the marches following Oscar Grant's murder. Despite this, it was clear from the beginning that she never had the slightest amount of credibility within the camp. This is seen from the way in which the support march organised by the Democratic Party's front group, Move On, was received at the camp on 15 October. Also, each time any official communication from the city arrived at the camp (no music after a certain hour, allow a cleaning team into the camp, eviction notice, etc.) it was either torn down or burnt at a general assembly accompanied by shouts of 'Burn it!' which were inevitably followed by a Michael Jackson song playing on the speakers. Her inability to canalise any part of the movement away from itself is the very moment where struggle produces itself, and not as an exterior consciousness, but as an awareness of the impossibility of reform. There was no space in which to maintain the belief that it would be possible to humanise the economy or the structure of the city, including, along with it, the police.

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One of the main forms of organisation which at the same time provided a method of resisting police and bridging gaps between the 'radical' groups and the youth of the ghettos was the series of FTP (Fuck The Police) marches organised at the end of every week from 7 January onwards.<sup>16</sup> Even if those marches were never of a particularly impressive size, what

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<sup>16</sup> With the term 'radical' we do not mean to describe the bearers of a correct consciousness, to which the ghetto kids could never have access, just as much as we do not think that growing up in ghetto necessarily produces radicality (a position, incidentally, which ends up at immiseration theory). The 'radicality' of the 'radical' groups exists only as an ideology, an ideology which sometimes fits better with one struggle than with another one. As for true radicalisation, that is only the product of struggles.

was remarkable about them was that they were organised by youngsters representing the youth of West and some of the poorest areas of North Oakland. A part of the movement from the beginning, these young people developed for themselves within the space of a few weeks the kinds of practices that were, up until this point, seen as the exclusive property of 'radical' milieus. Growing with the anti-gang injunctions and the complete decay of the poorest part of Oakland,<sup>17</sup> their need for self-organisation would find its resonance from Detroit to Compton.

The question of reproduction became, in spite of everything, a limit within the movement once the camp no longer existed. We mean this in the sense that this reproduction was no-longer taken directly in hand but was once again merely *confronted*. This is why the Move In Day of 28 January found itself in the sole dynamic of an escalating conflict with the police. By targeting a colossal Downtown building with the aim of transforming it into a social centre, a part of the movement was trying to reconstruct it around a dynamic of the question of reproduction within the city. This came after the focus on the port and disaster of the Longview struggle. But on top of targeting a far too large and symbolic building in relation to the forces at hand, public threats were made beforehand that if the police were to not allow the occupation to happen then the airport would be shut down. In practice, despite the height of the threat level in the American consciousness, this never happened, showing already that the emphasis was being put more on the side of conflict *per se* than any necessary objective with regard to the conflict.

The question is not to understand whether the strategy was right or wrong, although this is often how it was posed afterward. Despite the exhaustion of the movement more than 3,000 people came on that day. But, as soon as the police made it clear that what was going to happen would have nothing in common with 2 November or 12 December, a part of the crowd immediately left. The following hours were dedicated

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<sup>17</sup> Gang injunctions were invented in L.A. in the '80s and have since become a constant and standard policing method to such an extent that many of the sentences handed down concerning the movement were of a similar structure i.e. Stay-away orders regarding the plaza, children forced into Child Protective Services, etc.



to pitched battles between the police and the fewer than one thousand people who stayed. There was no hope that the building could be successfully taken and the battle took place purely for its own sake. The price was high, 409 people were arrested, and, from that day onwards, much remaining energy was absorbed into anti-repression and prosecution activities, responding to the threat of trials and personal stay-away orders. Despite still being situated at the heart of reproduction, a situation that must hit its limit if this it not experienced as a take-over, that day the movement was caught up in a dynamic which became decidedly different from that of the camp, and reproduction returned to the level of the suit of riot gear.

### ***Labour, General Strike and Grain***

The Oakland Commune was focused on the question of reproduction. However, it almost never questioned the idea of production. Although many tried to expand the struggle to the labour process, this process proved to be its constitutive limit. The general strike was the moment in which the movement attempted to lean over its own limits and wanted to expand itself to the labour process. The linking of the movement with school closures may have been another one. Those two moments failed to the extent that they did not manage to overcome the limits of the movement. This was so, not because something was lacking in the strategy, but because this limit was a constitutive and defining limit and that *generalisation* of the conflict was not produced beyond the boundaries of Oscar Grant Plaza.

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With regard to the schools, a budget vote which took place during the third week of the plaza occupation settled on closing five of them, all located in the poorest neighbourhoods, at the end of the year. The measure is part of a plan attempting to restructure the school system in Oakland before the end of 2013. Up to 30 out of 101 schools in the district

could be closed. Despite this, and despite the important participation of teachers and students at the camp, no really long lasting link was created between the square and the schools, although some of them are only a walking distance from the plaza. The Oakland Commune could not recognise itself in a struggle which addressed the reproduction of the proletariat and labour, a struggle located at the heart of where the crisis hit in the U.S., i.e. the local imposition of austerity measures. Outside of the square, nothing could be attacked.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond school closures, the key moment through which to understand the Oakland Commune's relationship to the labour sphere was the general strike and the port blockade of 2 November. Voted almost unanimously at the 1,700 strong general assembly that followed the first police raid on the camp (many more people were present at that moment but did not vote), the general strike was a challenge. One can see it as something quite ridiculous, as a general strike in which most people participating are not striking. Although it is not even on the unions' cards as most union contracts do not have clause stipulating the right to strike,<sup>19</sup> within those who had the potential to do so none of them asked to strike, although many thought that ILWU would.<sup>20</sup> Only a few unions, such as the SEIU (public sector) gave an official call-out for their members to take a day off in order to participate. (In this case a tacit agreement was made with city hall.) Consequently, besides the precarious workers, the unemployed, and the homeless, people who attended were those who were able to take day off for a holiday, and those who, working as civil

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<sup>18</sup> The occupation of Lakeview School which happened many months later (12 June to 3 July) cannot be presented as a real counter-example. Very few people participated in the occupation and the instructions coming from parents and teachers were clear: no relation with 'Occupy Oakland' would be tolerated.

<sup>19</sup> The right to strike was destroyed in the USA following the Taft-Hartley act of 1947 which was implemented after the general strike in Oakland in 1946.

<sup>20</sup> ILWU, a union representing mainly dockers of the West Coast was founded after the general strike of 1934 and is considered one of the last unions that can sometimes have more 'radical' positions. It played the central role in the Longview struggle.

servants, had the right not to come. Also there were those who, like the port employees and some of those working in restaurants and cafes, had a free day due to the fact that it was impossible to keep their work place open, or those who took a sick day.

What has to be taken into account, on the other hand, is the support which many unions showed towards the general strike by urging their members privately, and publicly, to take a day off. Many saw the motivation for this as stemming from a fear of losing ground and credibility; a fear of falling behind the movement.

However, to see only this would be to put emphasis on only one side of the story. What was most noticeable on 2 November was the crowd. Images of this crowd blockading the port are what remain from that day. Since 1946, no one in the US had marched under the banner of a general strike, with the exception of 1 May 2006 when millions of Latinos went on strike and marched in defence of immigration rights and against the HR4437 law.

Seeing the general strike as merely the result of an activist tendency within the movement cannot answer the following two questions: Why did more than 1,700 people vote for the strike? Why did more than 25,000 people turn out in a country which has forgotten its tradition of striking? If, instead of proposing a general strike, a few anarchists had proposed to retaliate against the police eviction of the camp by burning down City Hall, would 25,000 people have shown up with molotovs?

The general strike represented the desire to extend the movement into the sphere of production, that is to say, into the workplace. This strike only took place in direct response to the quasi-military eviction of the camp. Some might say that people just wanted to express their disgust against City Hall and its decision to destroy the camp and that they wanted to send a warning to the mayor. But, if so, why was there any need to talk about a general strike as opposed to simply having a afternoon march like the events that were happening in New York after the mass arrests on Brooklyn Bridge? There were many marches after the death of Oscar Grant, but no one spoke of a general strike then. What is

important is that everyone appeared to come with their home made sign saying something or other about the general strike.

When confronted with the police in their true guise, that of the forces of discipline, the population of Oakland, at that point largely sympathetic to the movement, naturally turned itself against that which makes it a compact whole: the labour process. As a result, that whole got a name: the proletariat. What could be seen happening during the vote on the night of 26 October is a generalisation, a contamination. Of course, it must also be taken into account that, for some, the general strike was 'a warning shot to the 1%', and came with a hope, albeit one not linked to any precise demand, that things could get better.

However, at the same time, the general strike, in contradistinction to the events of 1 May 2006, did not happen in as much as almost no-one went on strike. The moment where the possibility emerged to recognise oneself as a worker with her power became straight away a handicap. In other words, in the moment when class belonging was outlined, it was only produced as an external constraint. As soon as a struggle that thinks of itself as being solely political (and economic) comes to confront one of its limits and goes through the process of transforming itself, then it is a natural feeling to acknowledge oneself as labour power. But, the transformation of this struggle into something else by means of acknowledging everyone as labour-power could not, in this case, take place. The failure of the general strike was, then, the second step, after the moment of the vote, and after this the movement hit a wall and soon came to an end. Faced with this limit, the struggle could either die or progress through self-transformation, and it died. The moment between the vote and the day of the general strike should be seen therefore as a moment when a *rift* was appearing within the struggle.

An interesting parallel can be drawn with the European situation. In Greece, the occupation of Syntagma square managed to force unions to call for three days of general strikes on 15, 28 and 29 June 2011, the same days on which Parliamentary votes on austerity measure took place. In Greece, as in other countries in Europe, none of the numerous general strikes were able to prevent austerity measures. What one is witnessing

more and more in Europe is the absolute loss of the power of the general strike (or of the mass public sector strike) when it comes to the imposition of austerity measures. In the case of England, one day public sector strikes serve only to help stopping unions from losing face in a struggle always already lost beforehand.

The general strike in Oakland took another form. It was the moment of generalisation of the movement, at the same time as its swansong. After 2 November a larger and more confused camp was rebuilt for around ten days. The atmosphere and radicality of the first camp went away and after that no days of action possessed the same resonance. Despite this, one must reinsert the Oakland Commune within its historical context: it was not a movement against a precise set of austerity measures, since austerity in the US is distributed via individual relations to capital (credit, employment, etc.) and by State governments and City Halls rather than by the Federal government. The latter on the contrary is seen as having imposed the famous healthcare reform. As such, the strike in Oakland was a resistance to austerity, i.e. to the crisis, only to the extent that this can be seen through the prism of a particular police attack.

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In programmatism, the world was viewed as having the capacity to be turned upside down. That view was only possible because programmatism only concerned itself with distribution. Production for it was an invariant horizon. The factory was an empty fortress, and communism could only be seen as the redistribution of commodities within society. This view no longer rings true. The meagre reformist perspective of managing the economy has disappeared with the beginning of the crisis. From that point the first perspective which this world has to offer is that of blockading: the idea of the 'strike' conceived as the shutting down or occupation of the workplace by only those who work there directly has, in many struggles, been replaced by that of blockading the economy. Sometimes, 'strikes' are nothing more than names for what are essentially

movements of blockading.<sup>21</sup> From this follows the popularity of concepts such as the 'human strike'.<sup>22</sup> Some say that blockading is becoming more and more central out of efficiency, some because many people find themselves more and more excluded from production and it is the only way those people can then participate in struggles, but these are essentially two sides of the same coin. The concentration of the circulation of commodities at certain points, the absolute rise in the size of value manipulated per worker capita and absolute rise in investment per worker, the boom of the economy paid out of revenue and not capital (wrongly referred to as the 'service sector') and the rise of unemployment are all characteristics of the same moment of restructuring.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The movement against the pension reform in France in 2010 and the generalisation of the flying pickets was an exemplary case.

<sup>22</sup> The importance of the appeal to the idea of 'human strike', in the discussions around the Oakland Commune echoes, somehow, the success that the term had in the movement against the french pension reform in 2010. Although distant then from its original signification as developed in the text 'Sonogram of a Potentiality' (*Tiqqun* no. 2) which was much more linked to the new types of strikes developed in the sphere of reproduction by Italian autonomist feminists, the use of the same concept betrays a will to broaden the notion of strike beyond the sphere of production.

<sup>23</sup> One can use the term 'services' only if they are defined as immaterial production, which means nothing. There are only three sectors in the economy: the production of the means of production, production for the consumption of the proletariat (paid for by the wage) and production for luxury consumption (paid for by revenue). Someone employed at McDonalds or in a call centre selling mobile phone contracts performs now the labour that a farm worker picking up potatoes would have made before: she works for the consumption of the proletariat, for what her reproduction is at a given point. The idiotic idea of 'real needs' and 'fake needs' has no room in this; the reproduction of the proletariat is constantly extended; and its limits are what is socially necessary—'the transformation of what was previously superfluous into what is necessary, as a historically created necessity—is the tendency of capital' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, p. 528). Her labour, just as that of the farm worker, is paid by the wage, and finds itself in the next process of production only insofar as the body of the proletarian is sent back in the encounter with capital during the selling of the commodity labour-power. Thus the idea of a service sector that extends from finance unto fast-food chain is a carbon copy of the bourgeois economy and its wishful thinking.

The restructuring of the '70s occurred due to a crisis in valorisation that was only overcome by recentralisation in favour of the growth of revenue and a dismantling of the old production process with circulation becoming more and more central, since reducing circulation time allows a rise in the rate of profit. As pointed out in the text *Blockading the Port is Only the Fist of Many Last Resorts*: "The invention of the shipping container and the container ship is analogous, in this way, to the reinvention of derivatives trading in the 1970s."<sup>24</sup> This is one example of how circulation was put at the center of all technical developments and is now found at the core of many struggles.

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The disaster of the Longview struggle moved in parallel relation to the general strike insofar as it was the only other moment of the struggle which attacked the sphere of labour.

In Longview (State of Washington), a company known as EGT built a new grain terminal in the port and signed employment contracts without going through the union; employment conditions were thus far lower than those of other workers in the port. These actions ran directly against obligations between the port and the ILWU. Although the new contracts only concerned 50 workers directly, the aim was to set a new precedent for working conditions and through this to break the union's grip and free up West Coast labour markets. A conflict between the union and the company started in July 2011. In Oakland, after the success of the general strike, a day of action intended partly to be in solidarity with this struggle was planned for 12 December. The day aimed to shut down, not only the local port, but ports up and down the West Coast. Although participation was far inferior to the first shut down (falling from 25,000 to 5,000), the port was shut-down, as were those in Seattle, Portland and Longview. In the following weeks a caravan was also organised in order to block the arrival of the first boat coming into the terminal. This boat was then escorted by the army, and the militants who took

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.bayofrage.com/>

part in the action were then taken to task by the ILWU hierarchy, which signed contracts with EGT behind the backs of rank and file workers. These contracts stipulated conditions far worse than the current ones in place in the port.

More than 3 weeks after the destruction of the last camp, the 12 December day of action was an attempt to maintain the energy of the movement, whilst linking it to a struggle over working conditions. In spite of this, the day of action came across as merely an attempt to replicate 2 November and to integrate the energy of that day with more port workers. Somehow, then, the day of action was the recognition of the central limit of the movement: its inability to attack the sphere of production and labour. However, as shown by *Blockading the Port...*, written in anticipation of 12 December, that day also carried the risk of a shift which aimed at transforming the movement by canalising the energy that had been created into a good old-fashioned struggle of the worker against her boss, as well as institutionalising the port blockade as the only possible form of action. The sharp decline in participation between those two days showed the impossibility of rebuilding the movement around the positive conception of the 'productive worker' just as much as it showed that the movement had lost its momentum. Unlike 2 November, the majority of port workers did not join the pickets and went back home. The complete defeat of those who went to Longview in order to defend the rank-and-file showed the impossibility of managing to produce a carbon-copy of old struggles onto situations which are, once and for all, other. However, despite all this, 12 December was remarkable in the sense that, even if it marked an end to the movement, it succeeded once again in blockading the port of Oakland, and therefore in disrupting many chains of circulation—and it did this without many arrests, City Hall and the Police not knowing how to develop any kind of strategy to deal with it.

The nobility of mind of ILWU rank and file does not need to be questioned, nor the reasons for their struggle. What should be understood is how a movement, the defining limit of which was production and labour, can, simply by attempting to refocus on what it perceived as a lack and not as a limit, transform itself into a blind militancy and in the process alienate a large part of those who were a part of it. To attempt to



push a struggle until it produces out of itself an overcoming of its own limits, is to tend towards *generalisation*. In the desire to fill a lack it returns to the position of an obsolete vanguard. Ultimately, this movement cannot answer the following question. How could people who came to Oscar Grant Plaza for everything that they had lost, or rather had lost to a greater extent, in the middle of the crisis (housing, jobs, health, food, etc.) have recognised themselves in a struggle which, although linked to the present context of crisis, was ultimately a traditional struggle over the working conditions of workers living 700 miles away?

Once it was confronted with the impossibility of unifying the Occupy movement and a classical struggle around working conditions, the Longview struggle ended in a bitter fight between the two camps, despite the fact that some union members remained in opposition to their superiors. Even if struggles over the wage or working conditions are still an important part of global struggles, they are often lost causes, at least in most of the Western world. The very reason that the union bureaucrats accepted new working conditions at Longview is because they knew that this was simply the beginning of many attacks on working conditions in the coming years, and that these attacks would inevitably end in the massive retreat of the unions.

In moments like this wage struggles show their structural inability to make the leap to that which separates them, as a specific struggle, to *generality*. The point is not to blame a wage struggle for being what it is, but to understand how a struggle which tends towards generality ends up shutting itself away in the hopelessness of particularity.

### ***Withdrawal from Production? The Haunted House and its Glorious Tenants***

Questions regarding the port blockades of Dec. 12th stand in direct relation to many other struggles and the ways in which their limits have been perceived. For December '08 in Greece, as in the English riots of August '11, the question of productive labour is, in some analyses, a central issue. The dichotomy is always the same. For the sake of these analyses, productive labour equals productive workers, therefore this type of struggle can only extend if it is to transform itself and by including the 'productive workers' and by giving them back their first class seats. In opposition to

this, the autonomist answer is still to try to prove that everything produces surplus value and that, therefore, everyone is a productive worker. To define what productive labour is, is to define what it is *for* capital. It is an important question to the extent that it allows us to understand the dynamics of capital, but it is in no way a question that allows one to understand which individuals will play the most central role.

Production, circulation and reproduction are three movements of the same totality, of the same process. Production is the 'predominant moment' in this process because it is the 'real point of departure'. One could write about circulation and reproduction exactly as Marx wrote about distribution: 'Distribution is itself a product of production, not only its object, in that only the results of production can be distributed, but also its form, in that the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution, i.e. the pattern of participation in distribution.'<sup>25</sup>

We absolutely agree with *Théorie Communiste* when they say that 'if class struggle remains a movement at the level of reproduction, it will not integrate its own *raison-d'être*, which is production. This is currently the recurring limit of all riots and "insurrections", which defines them as "minority" struggles. Revolution will have to penetrate production in order to abolish it as a specific moment of the relation between people and, at the same time, to abolish labour through the abolition of wage-labour.'<sup>26</sup> But, when they add: 'That is the key role of productive labour and of those who at a specific moment are the direct bearers of its contradiction, because they live this contradiction in their existence which is both necessary and superfluous for capital at the same time. Objectively they have the capacity to make of this attack a contradiction for capital itself, to turn the contradiction that is exploitation back on itself as well as against themselves. The path of the abolition of exploitation passes through exploitation itself; like capital, the revolution is also an objective process.'<sup>27</sup> – this is the point where our roads diverge. Productive labour is a category within the reproduction of capital, not a class division.

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<sup>25</sup> *Gundrisse*, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Present Moment', *Sic* no. 1, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

There was an active subject in programmatism that was not the same as the proletariat i.e. the working class: this was because programmatism had production as its sole horizon and distribution as its sole target of attack. It is from then on that the notion of productive labour, and therefore of the productive worker, was the Trojan Horse of programmatism. Since the end of that epoch, some have tried in vain to prove that every labour, including reproductive labour is 'productive', some persist in tracing an old model and look desperately for the hiding place of the new productive worker who could act as a revolutionary subject, whilst others want to get rid of these categories which they see as purely moral. Going back to Marx allows us to understand what 'productive labour' really is as a *category* and not as a *class*. To undertake this project is not to start a theoretical debate on the sexuality of angels; it is rather the attempt practically to liquidate the categories in communist theory that do not let us see past the dead horizon of programmatism.

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From Marx, we can say that any labour paid for by capital is productive. We mean in the sense that it implies wage labour, surplus value and the transformation of surplus-value in capital. It is no coincidence that in the 'Missing Chapter VI'<sup>28</sup> the section on productive and unproductive labour follows that on subsumption. We can go as far as saying that any labour *really subsumed* by capital is productive. Therefore, in the present time, we can say that almost all labour performed by the global work force is productive. But it is so only from the perspective of a *particular* capital.

Individual labour is productive when it fulfils the aforementioned three conditions (wage, surplus-value, additional capital), i.e. the three *moments* of the *immediate process of production*: the selling and buying of the labour force, surplus-labour, and accumulation. However, this can only be considered on the level of the *individual* capital. 'Hence labour as producing *value* always remains the labour of the *individual* but expressed in the form of *general labour*. Consequently productive

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<sup>28</sup> See the appendix of the Penguin version of *Capital, Volume 1*.

labour—as labour producing value—always confronts capital as the labour of the individual labour-power, as labour of the *isolated labourer*, whatever social combinations these labourers may enter, into in the process of production. Therefore, whilst capital represents, in relation to the labourer, social productive power of labour the productive labour of the workman, in relation to capital, always only represents the labour of the *isolated labourer*.<sup>29</sup>

What Marx was missing was the ability to unify the theory of productive and unproductive labour (only fully elaborated in the manuscripts of the *Theories of Surplus-Value* and the ‘Missing Chapter VI’) with the theory of schemes of capital reproduction based on the division of total social capital into three sections, as developed in the third section of *Capital, Volume II*.

*At the level of total social capital, a labour is productive only according to the section in which it is realised.* Therefore, there can be productive labours in an unproductive sector and unproductive labours in a productive one. These two dynamics have nothing in common.

A worker in the sector of luxury consumption can be productive for the *individual capital* his boss represents, but he is not productive for the *total social capital* because the surplus value that he produces will be *realised* only when the commodity produced is bought, and this buying can only be done with the profits of another section. The surplus value that he produces for the individual capital is realised only by the *consumption* of a part of the surplus value of total social capital. Using the revenue, the capitalist ‘spends the fruit of his capital’.<sup>30</sup> The surplus-value that the individual capital realises will be divided into additional capital and consumption. At the level of total social capital, this surplus-value did not disappear; rather it piled up in an unproductive sector. There is no possibility of accumulation from an unproductive sector, whatever the productivity of labour that it has obtained.

<sup>29</sup> *Theories of Surplus-Value, Volume I*, addenda 12, section B, mark 1321.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The money which A here exchanges for living labour—service in kind, or service objectified in a thing—is not *capital* but revenue, money as a medium of circulation in order to obtain use value, money in which the form of value is posited as merely vanishing, not money which will preserve and realise itself as such through the acquisition of labour.’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 467.)

For the *individual capital*, there is a subsumption of the *productive worker*, for the *total social capital* there is a *distinction*. *Productive labour* can therefore only be understood at the level of the total social capital. It corresponds to a sector that cannot even be delimited to some commodities: the same flat screen sold to a proletarian who saved for months and to a capitalist who did not is, in the former case paid out of the wage, in the latter, out of the revenue. It therefore contains productive labour in the first case and unproductive labour in the second. The commodity that is being produced has therefore no importance whatsoever: 'This 'productive' worker cares as much about the crappy shit he has to make as does the capitalist himself who employs him, and who also couldn't give a damn for the junk.'<sup>31</sup> Neither does the labour because, as seen previously, a worker is nowadays always productive for her own capitalist. The experience of labour is the same, the exploitation of the 'productive worker' being the same as the exploitation of anyone else.

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The attempt to identify productive labour and the productive sector was not just the result of a poor understanding of Marxian categories, but the Achilles' heel of programmatism. Marx himself could not go beyond his epoch, and he steps back towards the end of the section on productive and unproductive labour in the *Theories of surplus-value*. Thus he comes back to what he just affirmed and attempts to identify productive labour and material production.<sup>32</sup> It is obvious that *material production* can in no way be a valid category ('to be *productive labour* is a quality of labour which in and for itself has absolutely nothing to do with the *particular content* of the labour, its particular usefulness or the specific use value in which it is expressed').<sup>33</sup> The capitalist mode of production is the *production of commodities*, material or not and one can in no way divide the sectors of production into material and immaterial. This hardly con-

<sup>31</sup> *Grundrisse*, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, addenda 12, section G.

<sup>33</sup> 'Missing Chapter VI' or 'Draft Chapter VI of Capital, Results of the Direct Production Process', mark 483.

vincing last minute about-turn is only the proof that in programmatism, productive labour could never be understood as a category, but always under a moral sign.

Marx couldn't avoid being programmatist. That era is over and one can now understand productive and unproductive labour only as categories. If those debates happened around the Oakland Commune (just as they did after the Greek riots of '08), it is because they are linked to the question of circulation, or to that of a 'service sector'. As we have seen, circulation per se does not enter in the category of 'productive' or 'unproductive'. As for the 'service sector', it exists only in the nocturnal dreams of the *Financial Times*' writers.

For all that, we cannot make the step which consists in saying that every proletarian is a productive worker or that it does not matter whether they are or not. This is not because it is wrong (that would not matter), but because to put the problem in this fashion is always to be motivated by political reasons, and those political reasons always hide what's at stake: the understanding of what capital is. For it is only from that understanding that our grasping of communism can be negatively outlined. An analysis that doesn't attack productive labour *as a category at the level of total reproduction of capital* can not envisage *the abolition of economy*.

### ***Classes Alliance, Identity and Percentages***

During more than two months, the Oakland Commune faced the reproduction of the proletariat as a whole, with all of its differences that make it an *unsustainable subject*. What does it mean to be part of the proletariat in Oakland? It can mean being a 50-year-old port employee who has seen her social level fall from comfortably middle class of the Fordist epoch to that of a proletarian suburbanite who knows she will never be able to come up with the payments on the life she bought with credit.<sup>34</sup> It can

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<sup>34</sup> The ambiguous term of 'middle classes' is here used for want of anything better. If it is undeniable that a good part of the American 'middle classes' are composed of workers (or their progeny) who saw their living standards rising in the same time as their credits during the years of economic boom, those classes have always had a particular vision of the world. Therefore, although they are part of it, putting them under the term 'proletariat' without understanding their

mean being a teacher who will get laid off in the next six months and have absolutely no idea where she will end up on the labour market. But most of the time, it just means growing up as surplus population, as one of the absolutely dispossessed, who have for their sole horizon of survival the crack or meth economy, prostitution and the porn industry. And in that case, it also means being a walking target for any scumbag with a uniform. In any case, to be a part of the proletariat means the impossibility of identifying oneself under any identity other than that of having 'No Future'. What made people go to the Oscar Grant Plaza was not the idea of a communal identity but of a communal lack. It was on that basis that people organised.<sup>35</sup>

That base was situated in the public sphere, the movement being constituted around a camp, located in Downtown on the main plaza. But what one found oneself witnessing was a contamination of the public sphere by the private sphere. The reasons that pushed anyone to come to the camp were individual reasons shared by all, personal experiences of a general poverty.

It is important to emphasise that the Occupy movement in the US never really went out of the squares, despite noteworthy and praiseworthy efforts such as 'Occupy the Hood'. Considered as a neutral place, the squares had the property of a reconquest of a public space (often owned by companies as shown by the legal complications around Zuccotti Park), at the same time making the space a private space where anyone could bring her own tent and expose her existence. The comparison, often made, with a Baptist protestant church is not without sense:

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particularities, is to not understand the collisions within the term once the many strata collapse. The re-proletarianisation of a part of the 'middle classes' is one of the main aspects of this crisis. Those people play therefore a major but also particular role. It is this particularity that we have to address.

<sup>35</sup> The Tumblr blog 'wearethe99percent' gives a quite precise idea of what all those who thought of joining the Occupy movement and still had an internet connection had in common: nothing, if it is not a life shattered by economic misery. Beyond the harrowing aspect of those texts, what is central is that no demand can get out of them. People expose their personal economic misery with the sad variety that goes with it and with the trace of hope being the 'Together we stay!'

what it's all about is to feel born again, to recognise a new belonging, to lay bare one's difficulties and feelings and to make them public. The 'human microphone' as a form of relations of struggle expresses this the best. Developed only to counter the ban against sound equipment in Zuccotti Park, it ended up being the only form in which the movement could recognise itself, its *differentia specifica*, in that it served before all to express the public sharing of a private suffering.

Delimited to this space, this 'Commune', the movement could address neither the public sphere nor the private one. To address the public sphere would have required it to be able to address labour and production. To address the private sphere would have required it to be able to pull down the Jericho walls that surrounded it, to attack neighbourhood after neighbourhood, and address there the causes that determine and construct the private sphere. Nonetheless, one must take note of the contamination of the private sphere by the public sphere as a common characteristic of all the various square occupations. The change that happened with the restructuring, change reinforced by the crisis, has meant that, in contradistinction to programmatism, where any struggle was necessarily situated only in the public sphere, the private sphere is now no longer an impregnable fortress.

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The class composition of the Oakland Commune was a key factor in its constitution compared to the other Occupy movements. In a city like Santa Cruz, which has a huge homeless population (mainly vets of the last wars), and a general population mainly composed of liberal middle-classes (the university of Santa Cruz is the main economic motor of the city and the price of real estate is amongst the highest in the country), the camp had no middle stratum and so could never get the same cohesion as elsewhere. In the end, it quickly turned into a homeless camp with discussions organised by and for middle-class liberals. When the occupation of a bank was happening literally on the other side of the river from the camp (a separation of less than a mile, each in complete view of



the other), and that place was about to be taken over by the police, some present in the occupation went to the camp to ask for some support. A friend recalled that after trying to convince a homeless person that it was in the interest of the camp to defend the occupation, this person pointed at the American flag in front of his tent and replied, 'Have you seen that? Does it read *Occupy* on it?'

This counter-example is just here to show us a rule: the physical cohesion of the movement (in as much as its limits) was due to the class variety within it. As we have seen, the geographical situation of the Oscar Grant Plaza, located four blocks from the frontier between Downtown and West Oakland, played a major role. By comparison, Zuccotti park in New York is located 8 miles from the Bronx. This explains the difference of composition between the two movements, since many couldn't go to Zuccotti or felt they had nothing to do there. The weakness of many of those square occupations was seen to be a prevailing feeling of non-unification, due to the lack of middle strata. Seen through cynical eyes, one can say that in some cities, those camping are either those condemned to it and those who can afford it.<sup>36</sup> In those cities, the moment of disintegration always comes when the higher strata leave out of disgust for their proximity to the lowest ones. This disgust was present in New York, it was a central dynamic in Santa Cruz, but, with the exception of individual quarrels, it never took shape in Oakland. To this must be added the fact that a big part of the middle stratum present at the camp had in general either some links with the jobs of the city or of the port, or with non-profits or the 'radical' milieu—and therefore couldn't be perceived as classes withdrawn into themselves and their dreams of suburbia.

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<sup>36</sup> One must not forget that camps cramped with tents are a banal element of the American decor. Since 2009, the development of Tent Cities, cities of homeless built within the city or on its outskirts, are following in parallel the numbers of foreclosures. Sacramento, with its famous Tent City of more than 1,500 people in 2009—including a main contingent of ex-truck drivers and workers in the building trade—was under the eyes of all cameras before being destroyed one week after the visit of the governor of the State, A. Schwarzenegger. In an unintentional rehearsal of the past, the Tent City was on the banks of the city river, the Mecca of the Gold rush.

The only form of conflict between the middle classes and the lower classes appeared after 2 November, in the continuous debates on the question of violence or non-violence. Many people from the middle classes tried to take over the GAs, pushing votes against any form of violent actions, but not taking part in the camp. Despite that, even if it was clear that during the GAs the debates on non-violence were mostly orchestrated by the middle classes, during the days of action, physical attacks against those smashing down shop windows were done by people of all classes and many poor Blacks participated, defending 'their city'.

Nevertheless there was less participation in general from the Latino population in comparison to the Black one, just as much as the numerically inferior participation of East Oakland compared to the West. The reasons for this are the distance that separate East Oakland, where the majority of the Latino population lives, and Downtown, its absolute isolation regarding transports, and the war that Latino gangs are indulging themselves in which makes sure that a lot of people are not able to leave the gang territory without risking getting shot. The organisation, from April onwards, of weekend BBQs in different neighbourhoods was a remarkable way to confront those problems and, even if the movement was by then gone, the success of this approach showed the richness of possibilities for local organisation.

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The class composition of this movement brings us to the question of *unification*, which is related to the sole slogan that can be highlighted from the US occupations (a slogan that sometimes pretended to be a demand but that can be nothing more than a house on sand): 'we are the 99%'. The movement of occupations was a cross-class struggle, admittedly, to the extent that a part was composed by diverse middle-classes petrified for their future. But the slogan reflects the idealism that drove a part of the crowd: that of a trans-class struggle, of a struggle where all classes would melt together under a common banner, but at the same time remain as they are, with their class particularities left intact. The disgust that quickly took over the liberal middle-classes towards the presence of

homeless in most camps is the most basic proof that this slogan was nothing but a fantasised identity, an identity that was absolutely unsustainable *per se*. Furthermore, the other side of the coin of the 99% slogan is the police, and the recurring, and absolutely idiotic, question 'Are cops part of the 99%?' was somehow the most sober confession of the helplessness of the movement of occupations in the US. It is only because there could be this fantasised unity of the 99% that this unity can extend to the only executioner which faces it.

For us, *generalisation* is opposed to *unification*. Unification imposes the subsumption of all under a unity. In generalisation, particularities are intact but become linked with each other, organically. Unification could only function in programmatism, since there was subsumption of all under a unique subject: the white male worker. Generalisation is the only communist horizon of the present moment. But one has also to understand this generalisation as generalisation of conflicts *within the struggle*, conflicts forcing the struggle to self-transformation.

If the slogan of the 99% has a richness to it, it is that of *unification* and not of *generalisation*. But beyond the numerous critiques that the 'radical' milieux have formulated, one must try to understand why, in a country where no one was speaking of classes anymore, such a slogan was able to bring together such varied classes; and one must also understand why such a question always brought forth one's belonging to the '99%' (which was becoming, as in a Baptist church, a purely performative function). The crisis, like all crises, brings with it the possibility of generalisation as much as a possibility of separation. The first aspect is that of a revolutionary moment, the second is the counter-revolution, these two aspects are produced jointly as the struggle unfolds. A generalisation is only possible once all the sub-classes forming the proletariat attack the mode of production. It is then that their class belonging falls apart and that they became *the* class, the *historical party*. The body of the proletariat then enters into the process of chemical precipitation. It becomes a body more solid than the milieu where it was born. The process of precipitation is this 'class-belonging'. But this class-belonging is already a handicap, an obstacle, an external constraint which, once accepted, turns out

to be solely a burden which one doesn't know what to do with. The slogan of the '99%', particularly in the US context, is a class-belonging slogan, a weak one, but still a class belonging nonetheless. And it is in that fashion that it becomes such a handicap. In the internal struggle of this *becoming-class*, the movement of communisation will be the tendency which, once class belonging has been posed as an external constraint, will tend towards the abolition of this class, and, from then on, of all classes. But before that, the question of *generalisation*, neither as impoverishment nor as compromise, but as radicalisation, will be the main question. This generalisation will be a moment of rupture that will turn on the masses. At its peaks, there was a glimpse of that in the Oakland Commune.

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Another aspect of the internal tendency of the movement to recognise itself under an unsustainable identity was the presence of the national flag. In the US, the question of patriotism did not have the same resonance as in the occupation of Syntagma square in Athens. Blaumachen underlines four reasons explaining the presence of Greek flags in the Indignados movement: the social structure of the movement and the links between class struggle and anti-imperialism, the perception of austerity measures as imposed by 'foreigners', the meagre place of Greece in the capitalist nations hierarchy, the migratory crisis in Greece.<sup>37</sup> But none of those reasons can explain the presence of American flags in the Occupy movement (not even the social structure, since it was not necessarily the petty-bourgeoisie carrying the flags but often the most impoverished—vets with no future on the labour market). In the same manner as the constant reference to the First Amendment, those flags appear within the terrain opened by the idea of a civil society not separated from politics. This idea can only take place when the struggle attacks neither the private nor the public sphere.

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<sup>37</sup> 'The Indignados' Movement in Greece', *Sic* no. 1.

In this fashion, any attempt to attack the private or the public sphere was an attempt to overcome the limits of the struggle. Somehow, self-organising as precarious workers or as women or queers were two sides of the same attack. But then one must answer the question: why did women and queers self-organise and not precarious workers?<sup>38</sup>

***From One Cycle to the Next, From One Counter-Revolution to the Next***

The cycle of struggle of anti-globalisation rested on the idea of the *alternative*. Behind the slogan ‘another world is possible’ was the idea of a society redefined by its own needs, of a magical overcoming of capitalism that would place the human being rather than the economy at the center of social relations. The movement of plaza occupations (Arab Spring, Indignados and Occupy) showed, as if it was needed, that this alternative is obsolete. If one looks at the Occupy movement, the main characteristic is the absence of demands, not by choice, but out of impossibility. But when one takes a closer look at those demands (because behind this absence, one must see an uncontrollable multitude of individual demands—each one coming to the square with her own home-made placard), what one can see is a brand new reformism, albeit one that can’t be recuperated politically. Abolish the Fed, make the banks pay, stop speculation—everyone comes with her little idea of management and all that gets blended in the middle of yoga classes, never-ending bongo playing, the shouting of a homeless person pretending he is an FBI agent and the smell of incense. The characteristic of the present moment is the impossibility of the slightest reform. In such a context, the avalanche of reformist propositions that made up the daily bread in all those camps should be seen only in their entirety, i.e. as evidence of the fact that no single slogan could emerge.

In Oakland, among the reactionary tendencies within the movement, a large portion of the terrain was filled by non-profits, which, with their influence on Black or Latino populations, were one of the pillars of the

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<sup>38</sup> Attempts to self-organise as precarious workers happened only once the movement had lost his breath and had lost the hope to reconquer a space. Furthermore, they never went beyond the ‘radical’ milieu.

movement at the same time as they were a brake pedal. Those non-profits pose the question the idea of a political legacy, of the transfer of 'radicalism' from one generation to another. Some who are part of them pretended that without their work, that is, the duty of spreading radical consciousness and maintaining struggles within local structures throughout the years since radical movements broke down in the '70s, that the Oakland Commune would not have been possible. This is probably a factor, but then one must once again ask the question of the break. If non-profits were able to carry on a form of the 'radical' tradition (a quite meagre and questionable tradition, however, seeing the compromises that the non-profits had made with the administration), their role during the Oakland Commune was to try to contain the movement. The first role of the non-profits was to install the debate on violence or non-violence after the general strike. But if some have seen here a battle over the question of legitimacy in the movement between 'radicals' and non-profits, the answer is of little matter. What matters is that, in most cases, it was the measures proposed by 'radicals' (refusing to compromise with the police, unauthorised demonstrations, the general strike, the occupation of buildings, posing the gender question, etc.) and not the ones proposed by the non-profits that were chosen by the movement.

But the non-profits raised the crucial question of racial legitimacy. One cannot think of a movement in the US without tackling the question of race and taking into account the particular functioning of capital in the US where its reproduction always ends up being racialised and where racism is based on urbanism and trans-class agreements as well as the role and the nature of daily-life state repression, and not just the simple will of a racist minority that would lead the country. Each time the non-profits endeavored to bring back order, they always did it under the banner of 'Follow those whiteys and you'll end up in jail!' The fact that this question found a recurring echo in the debates shows that it is a central one. Even if not all the members of non-profits are from ethnic minorities, they are respected by most of the people that compose those minorities. This is not always the case with 'radicals', who, for the most part, moved to Oakland out of free choice in the last few years. It is certain that a Black or Latino person from the ghetto does not have the

same position in front of a judge as a white person, especially if their cases are considered political. During the movement, a relationship between race and sentencing was more than obvious. The fact must be added that growing up in the ghetto means often carrying with you a police record, past jail sentences or a suspended sentence. OPD indeed spends its time targeting Blacks and Latinos in the poor neighbourhoods and courts are similar to mass slaughter. Therefore ending up in penitentiary for many years for the reason that a cop decided that you correspond to the wanted notice describing a 'young tall black man' is more than common. This is particularly important in the Californian context of the 'three strikes law' where three felonies require a life sentence. The question of risks and legitimacy was therefore central in the debates in and around the movement, not to even mention the question of involving undocumented immigrants. What must be underlined is that, although they were present, racial conflicts were very rare and 'radicals' found a lot of support from the people coming from the ghetto.<sup>39</sup>

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To the extent that those two cycles of struggle belong to the same period, one could think that the limits present in this struggle (centrality of reproduction, impossibility of class affirmation, etc.) were already inherent to the period of anti-globalisation. The key leap separating those two cycle of struggle is the withdrawal of the idea of the alternative. The slogan 'Another World is Possible' would now sound as dated as 'Bring the War Home!' and it is noteworthy that none of the slogans of the anti-globalisation era were present in the Oakland Commune, although references to the Black Panthers were constant.<sup>40</sup> But one should see the alterna-

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<sup>39</sup> Beyond all that, one question can be asked: why did the movement never succeed in integrating the Chinese population since the plaza is only a block from Chinatown?

<sup>40</sup> 'Power to the people!' was heard constantly, for example. Somehow, the Black Panthers appeared at this precise moment of the collapsing of programmatism, which means that their means of struggle took place only in the sphere of reproduction (free meals, free school, committees of neighborhood protection,

tive only in the way it interlinked revolution and counter-revolution in the previous cycle of struggle. The alternative was formalising practices of struggle once it was obvious that any workers' identity was gone. The alternative wasn't in itself a counter-revolution. It was counter-revolution that was using it, that was its achievement, working by solidifying the developed practices and positing them as a norm.

This cycle of struggle, like any cycle of struggle, has a horizon that contains within itself its own counter-revolution. The counter-revolution of this cycle of struggle has for its main content the creation of an identity that can only exist in the contamination of the public sphere by the private one—a contamination that is still not the abolition of both—and the idea of an autonomisation of the sphere of reproduction. 'Every stage of the development of the class struggle must overcome the traditions of previous stages if it is to be capable of recognising its own tasks clearly and carrying them out effectively—except that development is now proceeding at a far faster pace. The revolution thus develops through the process of internal struggle. It is within the proletariat itself that the resistances develop which it must overcome; and in overcoming them, the proletariat overcomes its own limitations and matures towards communism.'<sup>41</sup>

When there is no generalisation there is the loss of the content of rupture that was present in a practice. In Egypt, Tahir square allowed a completely new role for women within struggles, caused, at least in the beginning, by the very simple fact that everyone had to share the same place day and night. A year later, aggressions and rape of women are more and more common there and demonstrations denouncing sexual harassment are violently attacked. Any activity which tends then to go beyond the practices developed within a struggle, beyond the identity that arises from it and therefore does not allow any practice or any identity to become fixed, attacks what the present moment produces as counter-revolution.

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women's rights, etc.) whilst their theoretical and organisational structure was still purely programmatist.

<sup>41</sup> A. Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, Chapter III.



### ***Self-Transformation, Event and Activity***

In its constitution, the Oakland Commune had to deal with the whole of the reproduction of the proletariat, without a revolutionary process around it. This meant organising for food, health care, shelter, activities, and all the rest of it, whilst still imprisoned in the relations and categories of capitalism and all the 'old filthy business that comes with it'. It therefore constituted itself around a community that was the real community of the struggle inasmuch as it was a community within the capitalist world. Drug deals, for example, were not forbidden and, knowing that the police wouldn't enter the camp, many came to escape continual police harassment and ended up participating in the camp but also using it as a place to sell, although traditional pushers of the plaza did see their sales decline during the Commune. In another example, a participant was found in the camp and shot just outside of it by a someone who was looking for him exactly a month after the camp's beginning. Reality then struck back and everyone present describes the scene as a moment where no one knew what to do. Besides that, many were surprised that such a thing happened so late, as fights and brawls were constant. But, for many, the Oakland Commune was a process of self-transformation. The personal story of S., often discussed, is a typical illustration of it:

S. lived on the Plaza before the Commune. 'As soon as the camp arrived, S. began diligently working in the kitchen, effectively helping to set it up and distribute the cartloads of food which began flowing in. But for reasons that are unclear, S. became increasingly irascible and one day he snapped, brandishing a kitchen knife at someone in response to a dispute. S. then began threatening people and getting into fights several times a day[...] Attempts to mediate the conflict essentially failed, and S. seemed immune to all reason. One day, after he had started another fight, a group formed and attempted to run him out of the camp. But S. came back, more enraged and more dangerous. Finally, in the ensuing scuffle, someone hit him over the head with a 2x4 and knocked him out. When he regained consciousness, he wandered out of the camp, followed by some street medics, who called an ambulance. Two weeks later,

though, he returned. His affect was completely changed and he said he was taking some kind of medication. Once again, he became a dedicated participant in camp life, making new friends and involving himself in various projects.<sup>42</sup>

The Oakland Commune was not a form or a model, it was a dynamic. Within the dynamic of the camp echoed the individual dynamics, in the process of self-transformation, but still prisoners of the old world.

But besides daily internal brawls, no organ of order or regulation was set up. The 'safe space committee', which existed from the very beginning of the camp, never had or wanted to have the responsibility to solve brawls. And, more important, the anti-police patrols were constantly called upon to play the role of security guards within the camp but always refused this role and broke any possibility that existed to transform them into an internal militia by imposing quick team rotations. The only way to deal with those problems and to pose the questions that had to be posed was then through individuals or affinity groups.

Located within the reproduction of the proletariat, the Oakland Commune had to face the gender category. By 'category', we do not mean an abstraction or a vague sociological classification. Each mode of production has its own categories and they exist as relations. If the camp was to be a haven for anyone (and it was a haven inasmuch as it was securing meals, shelter and a protection against the police), it had obviously to be one first of all for women or queers. And this is where the

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<sup>42</sup> 'But one day, after a police attack on the plaza, he was arrested for obstruction of an officer, a relatively minor misdemeanour. The Anti-repression Committee was unable to secure his release, however, because he was on probation. He was transferred to the county jail where, as usual, they refused to give him his medicine. What happened next is unclear, but he is alleged to have assaulted a guard. The charge he received, felony assault on an officer, would have meant a potential 'third strike' under California's three strikes law and, consequently, a life sentence. Although there was an entire subcommittee devoted to his defence, he was forced to take a plea deal in order to avoid the third strike. He is now serving a 4 year prison sentence.' (J. Bernes, 'Square and Circle, the Logic of Occupy', *The New Inquiry*).

question of activity comes up. Women and queers *had* to self-organise for a matter of survival,<sup>43</sup> but they had to self-organise *within the totality that was the camp*. And this totality, as we said, couldn't exist as such. Women and queers self-organising were therefore one of the main dynamics that would prevent the camp from falling into a fantasised identity, that of the 'we are the 99%', because the 99% is a compact whole of the individual poverty and violence of capitalist relations. The 99% is harassment, rape and murder. The organisation of an Occupy Patriarchy front was a constant reminder that nothing that united this camp but in the negative. It was the creation of a struggle within the struggle and was one of the dynamics that went against the fact that the struggle, not facing its own limits, would fall into an identity. That became *concretely* clear when, in the second camp, women and queers were not as strongly organised (much preparation work needed to be done outside of the camp and this work forced old-school participants to be absent whilst new people were constantly flowing in) and sexual harassment became more and more frequent.

If the gender question was central in the internal dynamics of the camp, partly by the implication of certain tendencies within it, gender as a whole was not questioned. The connection between the gender question and the limit constituted by the sphere of labour is obvious: it is because the Oakland Commune couldn't attack the sphere of labour that it couldn't completely question gender. labour is what allows the separation of the totality into spheres: production and reproduction, public and private. labour creates gender and without grasping labour, gender always runs the risk of being essentialised. Despite all that, due to the anchoring of the camp within the reproduction of the proletariat and the activity of certain part of the camp, the gender question was addressed during the struggle.

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<sup>43</sup> Concerning the Queer movement, survival and self-organisation, see the Bashback comrades [*Bashback! Queer ultraviolence*, Anthology, Ardent Press]. For those who consider the term 'survival' an exaggeration, let us recall two murders. Brandy, a Black transsexual, was shot, less than a hundred feet from where the camp was located, the following April by a man enraged to discover that s/he was a transsexual. Tsega Tsegay, active participant in the camp, was beaten to death by her husband a few months later.

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What is a 'rift?' It is an event that says: 'We have to *act as a we* but we can no more *exist as a we*.' It is the moment where everything that forms an external constraint ends up being put into question by the production of a new practice. Within a struggle, it is any moment that shows a possible overcoming of what the struggle is, of its conditions and its limits, towards generalisation. What are the margins for action around and within those events? They are taking part in struggles, understanding their limits and hitting against them, defending measures and practices that will open self-organisation—or the practices inherent to a struggle—towards its abolition.

Communisation will be the abolition of all classes by the proletariat and this overcoming is already being produced in present struggles as a horizon at the same time as its counter-revolution. But if communisation is nothing but a set of measures, those measures will have to be pushed for and defended. They won't come down from heaven. Some groups have coined the term 'rift' to name the activities in the present moment that announce communisation. It is of course obvious that those activities are not the property of a 'communising tendency' or even of a political milieu, but are a current in the sense of a shared horizon.

What is central is that these activities are not the germs of a revolution to come, they are not a model for what communisation could/should/will be, and they are not the beginning of the revolution. They are the activities that are necessary at a present situation because they struggle with communisation as their horizon. They are nothing other than practices within the current struggles, practices that can never be formalised.

Capital wants to turn any limit into a barrier that it can overcome. So does anyone in a struggle, at the moment of a rift. This barrier, built or present as a necessary first step, is self-organisation or any other form of practice developed by the struggle. Capital, as a mode of production, can never overcome its own limits. When a mode of production transforms its barriers into limits and overcomes them, it means that it grows into a new mode of production. Every limit always acts to define. Once

a struggle overcomes its own limits, it leaves 'the struggle' behind and engages in a revolutionary process. There, there is no growth, but only rupture.

### *Farewell to the Commune*

Some might question the fact that we chose to call the Occupy Oakland movement the 'Oakland Commune'. This name didn't come from the pure wishful thinking of militancy, but reflects somehow a reality of the struggle, with its splendour and its weaknesses. Condemned to a plaza and with the sphere of labour as its constitutive limit, the Oakland Commune was one of the most prominent and sharpest moments of the present crisis (neither its product, nor its cause, but a *moment* of the crisis), but at the same time bound to be an enclave. If we have tried to analyse this struggle, it is to see towards which horizon it leads. Analysing a struggle is not to 'see in poverty nothing but poverty', but to see 'in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society'.

In all that it achieved, the Oakland Commune was the strongest echo from the future that if there will be a communist revolution, its content will be the complete abolition of all the categories and relations of the capitalist mode of production. As a crystallisation of the present moment, the Oakland Commune showed everyday, in its defeats as much as in its victories, that every category of the capitalist mode of production creates a limit that the struggle must overcome. This overcoming is possible only through generalisation, contamination of all the cell tissues of society. This generalisation is not an enlargement, but a moment of rupture.

The expansion of struggles outside the work place and therefore taking reproduction as a whole into consideration is a moment of the crisis, something that no one could have envisioned. In this fashion, the US Occupations, and in Oakland more than anywhere else, went a step further than December '08 in Greece. Many struggles now are within the reproduction sphere and the sphere of labour is then always a constitutive limit of those struggles. Three reasons for that: the end of the worker identity and its tradition of struggle (which is as well the clearance of its juridical framing), the diversity of the proletariat in times of crisis (once

the different strata collapse) and, above all, the drastic fall in the real wage compared to the nominal one. Consequently, the autonomisation and the personification of the moments of the production process are often the horizon of struggles (seeing finance capital as parasite of the 'real economy', the '1%', etc.). But if labour and production are still ghosts in those struggles, it doesn't mean at all that the productive workers will be the central figure of the coming struggles. Labour and production will have to be absorbed fully *as categories* before measures can be taken for their abolition.

If a revolutionary period happens, struggles will then overcome the seclusion of those spheres, not by considering production as the so far missed or unseen centre, but by extending attacks from the heart of reproduction to the heart of production. Production won't be able to be the centre that it used to be, but only one part of a whole. The struggles won't transform themselves step by step, but will go through moments of rupture. Within the struggles, those moments of rupture will allow one to glimpse, in its totality, the mode of production that lies under a suit of riot gear.

Rust Bunny Collective, Autumn 2012

Note: Warm thanks to all the comrades who, through their help, their information and their analysis, have made the writing of this text possible.

'We are on the side of the species' eternal life, our enemies are on the side of eternal death. And Life will swallow them up, by synthesising the two terms of the antithesis within the reality of communism.'<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A. Bordiga, *The Revolutionary Program of Communist Society Eliminates All Forms of Land Property, of Productive Installations and of Products of labour* (personal translation from *Bordiga et la Passion du Communisme*, Spartacus, p. 69).



# Limit Analysis and its Limits

As a mode of inquiry into the conditions of present-day and historical struggles, much recent output from the so-called ‘communisation current’ might be described as a kind of *limit analysis*. This mode is something more than the usual exercise in unhappy consciousness we have come to expect from the ultraleft. Rather, we are told, limits are the very condition of possibility for struggles. They are generative, the source of struggles’ dynamism as well as their transience and inevitable failure. The horizon of communisation, in this sense, appears through these impasses, just as the virtual depths of a painting appear as the thickening of paint on a canvas surface. Each historical moment, in this sense, has a form of transcendence specific to the limits it presents for proletarian struggles—communisation, then, is that form of overcoming which opens from the particulars of today’s struggles. In attending to the two-fold character of the limit—both barrier and horizon—such analysis shares something with dialectical thought in general, and its willingness to think two incompatible thoughts at once.

But there are limits, alas, even to the study of limits, which can all too quickly pass over into fatalism and theodicy—as if the tragic text of history were already written, and our task only to discover the fatal flaw present from the outset. When done well, however, this method is about the search for the new in history: a new given by struggles themselves and merely registered by theory, a new immanent to the ever-changing terms under which proletarians meet capital and its powers. To register these new developments, however, requires close attention to all of the forces at play in a particular moment. Otherwise, limit analysis is just a machine for affirming assumptions.



‘Under the Riot Gear’ exemplifies both the good and the bad of such a method. There is no little amount of insight into what happened in Oakland during 2011 and 2012, and it is certainly one of the most rigorous and engaged accounts we’ve read. There are numerous moments worth commending. The distinction arrived at in the concluding pages, between processes of *generalisation* and processes of *unification* is incisive and, even better, portable. But there is quite often a mechanical application of certain conceptual frameworks (a mechanisation with the ironic effect of naturalising its own assumptions, as we shall see later on). While we often agree with many of these frameworks, in whole or in part, we can’t help but feel that the way in which they are applied leaves something to be desired.

‘Under the Riot Gear’ follows the analytical schematic elaborated by Theorie Communiste in essays such as ‘The Present Moment’ and ‘The Glass Floor’, in which it is suggested that, for proletarians at present, ‘the very fact of acting as a class appears as an external constraint, a limit to be overcome’. This means that every time proletarians affirm themselves as a class—as labour power—they likewise must affirm and sustain capital. Under present crisis conditions, workers often struggle merely to keep their jobs; in other words, they struggle to maintain the capital–labour relationship as such. Minimal modifications and defensive struggles are the order of the day. As a result of the restructuring of labour, workers are compelled to make endless sacrifices, effectively adopting the standpoint of capital in order to preserve and extend their access to the wage. If previous generations might have imagined working-class struggle as a process of ‘self-valorisation’ in which workers gradually won for themselves an autonomy from capital, now the affirmation of class identity seems one and the same with an affirmation of the imperatives of capital and its right to manage. Action as a class becomes self-undermining.

This shift in the structure of the capital–labour relation has shattered the material coherence of the factory, of industrial production, in the formerly industrial core—via automation, off-shoring, disaggregation of productive processes, and the remaining litany of post-Fordism. Exiled from the factory floor, proletarian antagonism finds itself in the streets,

departing the space of production for the space of reproduction or circulation. The December 2008 uprising in Greece is a paradigmatic example of this displacement, in the reading given it by *Theorie Communiste*: the most explosive encounters occurred between precarious, marginalised proletarians and the state, while the formal, unionised working-class involved itself rather late and ambivalently. Once antagonism has been displaced in this manner, proletarians face off against the apparatuses which reproduce their class identity: the police, the schools, the trade union offices and various governmental agencies. The promise of such struggle is that, in attempting to negate the forms of class belonging which now appear 'as external constraint', it might pass into open insurrection that puts both labour and capital into question and affirms neither. The concomitant limit, conversely, is that such antagonism remains at a remove from the heart of production and is unable to bring the economy as such to a halt.

While sometimes insightful about the differences separating Oakland from Athens and Thessaloniki, 'Under the Riot Gear' applies this analysis to Oakland somewhat heavy-handedly. We read, for instance, that the unique contribution of Oakland and the other plaza occupations is that, there, the proletariat took in hand the question of its own reproduction. Unlike Greece, 'the space of struggle was no longer only contained in the face to face encounter against the police, but in the face to face encounter with the reproduction of the proletariat.' Nonetheless, for the authors, this direct engagement with reproduction brought its own challenges, naturalising an 'autonomisation' of the sphere of reproduction consequent on the growth of superfluous, unwaged proletarians. This makes it more difficult to examine the ways in which the materials for the mutual-aid based structures of the camps came from the surrounding capitalist economy (and were sometimes paid for with money earned from the sale of labour power).

This is where the piece displays its own taste for hyperbole, and we read, for instance, that as a result of this autonomisation, '[the Oakland Commune] never questioned the idea of production', a point contradicted shortly; the following pages largely concerns Occupy Oakland's

two blockades of the Oakland Port, and its intervention into the struggle of port workers. This discussion also stands in contradiction with the likewise hyperbolic claims that ‘Outside of the square, nothing could be attacked.’ As is well-documented, all sorts of things beyond the square were attacked in the many nights of rioting, disturbances that spooked the Oakland Business Association enough for it to speak to the press about declining sales and businesses which had chosen not to relocate to Oakland given its lack of security. However, we find ourselves in agreement with the spirit if not the letter of our correspondents’ wording, if by this spirit we are meant to understand that the Oakland Commune was unable to pass into a phase of sustained attack against the economic forms upon which it depended. It’s true that the Commune’s central feature was a fundamentally passive and defensive one: the camp, a space in which the reproduction of the proletariat was directly engaged through structures of mutual aid and free giving. Though this space was defended, the moments of open violence were responses to attacks on the camp, or alternately, responses to attempts to thwart its reestablishment. To overcome this limit would have meant the passage into open insurrection and the transcendence of the ‘camp-form’.

That said, we are compelled to linger over the categories of *strike* and *production* which ground the critique—not to defend the virtue of the encampment, but precisely to shake these matters loose from a static conception and bring them to life in the present situation. Without this there will be no understanding of the Oakland Commune, nor the terrain in which the practices of communisation may unfold.

### ***What Is a Strike?***

If such a passage to open insurrection were at all possible, it would have occurred during the climactic moment of the General Strike of Nov. 2, when the camp-form was left behind, briefly, for a moment of offensive expansion. This is where the authors’ application of the ‘class belonging as exterior constraint’ thematic becomes most interesting and, in our view, problematic. For the authors, the declaration of a general strike, which might further have meant the transformation of the struggle into

a form capable of challenging production as such, merely reproduced the externality of class belonging: ‘inasmuch as almost no one went on strike, the moment where the possibility to recognise oneself as a worker with her power became straight away a handicap. In other words, in the moment when class belonging was outlined, it was only produced as an external constraint’.<sup>1</sup>

But it is unclear in what way the labeling of this event as ‘strike’ was a handicap: 2 November was doubtless the high point of the movement. If it’s true that the term ‘strike’ was a false one, this seems to have been a generative rather than limiting delusion. In any case, we don’t believe the term ‘general strike’ meant what the authors imagine it meant for the participants – that is, we don’t think it was delusion. *As we remember it, to call for a general strike meant, rather, to call for a general attack on the economy as such; in other words, it was a call for an interruption of the capitalist economy, whether by withdrawal of labour power (individually, collectively), blockade, occupation, targeted sabotage or generalised rioting.* All of these tactical elements combined on 2 November. This sense of *strike* is neither new nor lost to history, as we shall see; it persists in dialectical relation to particular conditions. As the authors themselves note, the ‘strike’ as withdrawal of labour is merely one among the ensemble of elements which come together in the ‘general strikes’ of the past. If withdrawal of labour was the primary element in the general strikes of the past 130 years—which from the outset involved blockade, expropriation, sabotage—increasingly that role is now held by the blockade. These blockades have as their subject proletarians in the expanded sense that includes

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<sup>1</sup> Once again, the piece relies on hyperbole to make its point, since longshoremen walked off the job in the morning, and there was a ‘sick-out’ by Oakland Teachers which shut down many schools. Furthermore, many other workers took personal days or simply refused to report to work that day. Though one might not want to call such actions a strike, they are nonetheless effective in crippling workplaces. The immigrant strike of 2006, ‘el gran paro’—with which the authors contrast the November 2 General Strike—was largely accomplished this way, through the individual withdrawal of labour power and for this reason not referred to as a ‘strike’ either at the time or afterward.

not only labourers, but all those who are 'without reserves,' including the unemployed. The blockade is the form for an era of expanding superfluous populations, as the *piqueteros* of Argentina and more recently the *piquets volants* of France have already shown us.

### ***Where Is Production?***

In many respects, the participants in this new type of 'general strike' grasp something, organically and spontaneously, which 'Under the Riot Gear' misses. It is no doubt true that the spheres of circulation and reproduction depend upon the sphere of production and productive labour; however, the converse is also true. Production can be halted *from beyond*, by proletarians who are not productive labourers, through an interruption of the circulation upon which production depends. In the same manner, struggles in the sphere of reproduction might degrade capital's ability to find the labour power it needs. If the commodities (raw materials, half-finished goods, finished goods) and bodies which capital needs don't arrive at the factory, the warehouse, or the retail outlet, then all labour and all production of value stops.

Furthermore, production and circulation are today entangled in newly complex ways. Circulation is now internal to production. As noted above, with the supply-chain Taylorism of Toyotaisation and the related logistics revolution, the factory has been disaggregated, parcelised and distributed in planetary networks such that the production of a singled finished item might require the coordination of dozens of producers. These networks are highly brittle; the use of just-in-time transport schemes and sophisticated logistics protocols to accelerate and manage flows of commodities means that there is little room for error, as once-common stockpiles and buffers have been eliminated. Given the extent of these networks, disruptions of circulation at certain key chokepoints can have far-reaching effects on production. Finally, circulation is internal to production in the sense that, under the reign of Walmart and the new mega-retailers, production is driven by consumption in new ways. In the so-called 'pull-production' model, goods are not produced or shipped until data is received

from the retailer indicating that stocks have fallen. Items are pre-sold under such an arrangement, at least ideally, and consumption exerts a determinative effect on production.

In all regards, then, an intervention into the sphere of circulation is, at one and the same time, an intervention into the sphere of production. And while interventions into the sphere of circulation do not have seizure of the means of production as their horizon in the same way that interventions into production do, it's unclear that such seizures are even workable today, in most areas, where production is limited to peripheral or secondary items of little use beyond capitalist social forms.

### ***What Is Production?***

It proves significant as well that the authors misrecognise the character and present situation of productive labour. There is a risk of pedantry in all such discussions; the authors route around this by cherry-picking a partial idea from Marx, asserting that 'We can go as far as saying that any labour really subsumed by capital is productive.' Should the words of Marx be the measure, he himself refutes this in a dozen places; more significantly, his full assessment accords with the developments we have seen in the global economy, including rising volatility and declining profitability beyond the nominal price regimes of the Finance/Insurance/Real Estate sector. Such developments are consistent with, for example, Marx's careful analysis and verdict in Volume 2 of *Capital* regarding the non-productive character of work given over to transforming money capital into commodities or the reverse, said work which 'includes circulation, or is included by it'.

But suggesting that a certain labour is unproductive does not mean, at the same time, disputing the *social necessity* for such work: 'Just as the circulation time of capital forms a necessary part of its reproduction time, so the time during which the capitalist buys and sells, prowling around the market, forms a necessary part of the time in which he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as personified capital. It forms part of his business hours... The change of state costs time and labour power, not to create value, but

rather to bring about the conversion of value from one form to the other, and so the reciprocal attempt to use this opportunity to appropriate an excess quantity of value does not change anything. This labour, increased by evil intent on each side, no more creates value than the labour that takes place in legal proceedings increases the value of the object in dispute'. Seen in this light, banking, bookkeeping, advertising, and numerous administrative tasks are at one and the same time essential to the reproduction of capital and, nonetheless, unproductive.<sup>2</sup>

This distinction has become more rather than less significant to capital's struggle for its own reproduction. As it has restructured away from industrial production, capital has sought revenue increasingly in the sphere of circulation—for the given capitalist acts under the compulsion to seek revenue rather than to produce new value. This compulsion precisely constitutes an internal limit for capital, setting profit against accumulation and price against value, and must be understood as an immanent character of the present crisis. It is of little interest to chuckle over the capitalist's failure to have understood his Marx; rather, we simply note that the shift of resources and jobs toward the task of realising greater portions of decreasing surpluses, at an ever-quickenning pace, provides as well an opportunity for capital's antagonists.

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<sup>2</sup> Various passages in Marx are useful for grasping the relation between money capital and *productive* capital, between circulation and production, and between revenue and value. Consider for example *Capital* vol. 2, chs. 1 & 6; vol. 3 chs. 4, 16–19; *Grundrisse* Notebook 2 ('It is damned difficult for Messrs the economists to make the theoretical transition from the self-preservation of value in capital to its multiplication', 270–1); I.I. Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theories of Value*, Ch. 19 ('Thus the question of *productive labour* rests on the question of *productive capital*, i.e., on the well-known theory, in Volume II of *Capital*, of the "Metamorphoses of Capital". According to this theory, capital goes through three phases in its process of reproduction: money capital, productive capital and commodity capital. The first and third phases represent the "process of circulation of capital", and the second phase, the "process of production of capital". 'Productive' capital, in this schema, is not opposed to unproductive capital, but to capital in the 'process of circulation'). For a full discussion of the literature, see Ian Gough's 'Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour' from the *New Left Review*, 1/76.

Since capital sustains itself through the generation of value—and enters into crisis where the production of value falls below a certain level—antagonists will want to understand which sectors are value-generating and which are not. But this value-analysis is often taken to be a strategic analysis; Marxists are all too quick to assume that value-productivity equals strategic centrality, and that struggles in ‘productive’ parts of the economy will be more significant. This is quite simply untrue. As above, whether or not something produces value does not, in the end, determine its usefulness for the reproduction of capital. The banking and credit systems produce no value on their own. Nonetheless, the freezing of the credit-supply can bring the productive economy to a standstill in a matter of days. Value-analysis might be a necessary preliminary to a strategic understanding of capital, but it is no substitute for it.

It is no doubt the case that the restructuring of capital, such that the productive sector is ever harder to discern in places like Oakland, presents real difficulties. Rather than a value-analysis, we might instead orient ourselves toward the concomitant difficulty in finding the use-values necessary our survival; the looting of a circulatory entrepôt, after all, can provide only temporarily for material needs. The seizure of reproduction *from* capital would have remained inaccessible to the Oakland Commune even if had passed beyond its limits. At the same time, attacks on capital’s presently vulnerable nodes, where are aggregated the processes of transforming commodities to money, should be understood as a nascent and tentative advance in the tactics explored by the Oakland Commune. The question for us, then, concerns the elusive unity of practice in coordinating these twin imperatives: the destruction of capital’s self-reproduction and the command of our own. We take the practical discovery of this unity to be communisation.

### ***Class Belonging?***

Having forced the general strike rather unrelentingly into the mold of the Greek riots (perhaps because of its misunderstanding of the ways in which production and productive labour present a limit), ‘Under the Riot Gear’ misses the specific points of difference between the unfolding



of class belonging and antagonism in the Greek case and Oakland. If class belonging was an external constraint in Oakland, it was one actually *personified* by particular factions and groups. To understand this, though, one has to look in detail at some of the loathsome political maneuvering that accompanied both the port blockade on the day of the general strike and the subsequent blockade in December.

Though the ILWU (the longshoremen's union) wears proudly a legacy of radicalism stretching back to the 1930s and is typically much more combative than the majority of American unions, long since domesticated to the needs of capital, it tends to engage in 'political strikes' (which are illegal in the US) through a rather peculiar, legalistic mechanism. Because a clause in their contract gives longshoremen the right to refuse to cross a picket line—even a 'community picket'—they initiate work stoppages by inviting 'community activists' to picket at the gates of the port. This bit of theater is performed for the benefit of an arbitrator who perfunctorily declares working conditions 'unsafe,' allowing the dockworkers to stop work without risking sanction. This is a curious inversion of the 'class belonging as external constraint' thematic—the longshoremen exteriorise their antagonism in the form of a crew of outsiders because their own contractual identity as workers has become a fetter. Even when it originates with the workers themselves, antagonism must come at the workplace from the outside, through a strange political ventriloquism.

Though the idea of blockading the port on 2 November—in support of the call for a general strike—emerged from the exchange between community activists and ILWU union members, the size of the forces conjured up by Occupy Oakland made it something entirely different, a blockade rather than a piece of theater, as the workers had no chance of getting through to the port, regardless of how the arbitrator ruled. And though the blockade was later described as an intervention into the Longview struggle, for the most part, the tens of thousands of people that marched on the port that day had little knowledge of the Longview struggle. They marched on the port for the same reasons that people came out to the events earlier in the day—to protest the destruction of the

Oakland camp and the concurrent attacks on Occupy camps throughout the country, and more generally, out of solidarity with the invitingly vague political stance of the Occupy movement, which allowed people to protest against the various conditions of impoverishment, unemployment, and dispossession (often dispossession of the rights and privileges of the American middle class) that they experienced. For all the vagueness of Occupy, the attendees were there for themselves.

But as plans for a second blockade emerged in the following weeks, the entire narrative was rewritten such that the sequence of blockades became largely about lending support to the heroic but insufficient activity of the Longview workers, as well as to the incipient struggle of port truckers in Los Angeles. This had the result of domesticating the antagonistic forces which were unleashed by the General Strike, essentially making the Oakland Commune into the volunteer militia of port workers who, for the most part, would not act on their own behalf. Thus the external constraint appeared once again, a mirror image of the first time: with the help of some labour activists in the movement, the port workers—as image of class belonging—harnessed the combative energy of Occupy Oakland and diverted it away from any question of acting for itself, which would have meant acting against this image of class belonging and of the self-appointed activist leadership which facilitated the second blockade. Such an arrangement was paralysing for both sides: the longshoremen were rendered complacent by the externalisation of their capacity for antagonism, and the tatterdemalion mob from Occupy was directed away from the question of its own needs and toward the defense of this essentially passive class identity, one it couldn't even inhabit. The problem, therefore, is not that the assorted proletarians from Occupy deluded themselves that they were labour. Rather, the problem is that they accepted that such actions are only meaningful and potentially decisive when done *on behalf of* labour: that the labour strike must always subsume the strike of non-labour.

### *The Morality of Production*

But there is a risk, as we shall see, of identifying the Commune's reorientation toward traditional labour struggles as a tilt back toward some natural equilibrium. Instead, it registers an incomplete motion toward rearticulating the place of the strike. Though the temporality of narrative retelling underscores the sequence in which there were strikes at two different times (one in November, one in December), we might instead suggest that *the Oakland strike was always in two places*: the place of orthodox labour, to which the ragtag crowd brought some novelty, and the place of non-labour, to which the unions brought a pernicious element of moral legitimacy. This doubling too is a form of the moving contradiction, the two strikes grinding against each other as part of a larger dynamic through which the mode of struggle develops, moving against capital by moving with it. But neither position in the contradiction is itself stable, much less natural.

It is here that 'Under the Riot Gear' lurches perilously toward the error of recreating 'labour' as the natural state of the antagonists. This happens more than once, for example, 'As soon as a struggle that thinks of itself as being solely political (and economic) comes to confront one of its limits and goes through the process of transforming itself, then it is a *natural* feeling to acknowledge oneself as labour power [*Se reconnaître comme force de travail est un processus naturel*]. But, the transformation of this struggle into something else by means of acknowledging everyone as labour power could not, in this case, take place' (our emphasis).

Contrarily, if the antagonists had a 'natural' reaction on 2 November, it was to attack capital where it was accessible and vulnerable—not from an ideological self-identification, but as an objective measure of capital's own necessary expulsion of bodies from productive labour. This process includes both the production of surplus populations and the redistribution of jobs toward necessary but non-productive labour.

Theorie Communiste argue that programmatism should not be grasped as a colloquy of mistakes, but as an expression of the conditions of revolutionary possibility within the era we now designate as programmatist. We would argue in parallel that the strike in the place of

production, the strike of labour as hegemonic form of anticapitalist struggle, also belongs to an era. This era was inaugurated by the generalisation of the wage-form by the industrial revolution; now it wanes in parallel with the decline of the industrial wage and the receding primacy of production as capital's self-conception. Thus we see a corollary to the struggles of that earlier moment, both return and revision: the blockade, the strike beyond the sites of production, bears a genealogical resemblance to the 'export riot' of the eighteenth century. But now with a difference: if those struggles meant to prevent the departure of use-values, of the means of reproduction, from leaving the country, the blockade returns after the production of such use-values has long since fled. Instead it is capital's means of reproduction that come under attack. Capital, we must recall, has its own limits, and reforms itself in its drive to overcome them; it is precisely this we see in the intensified need to find revenue in circulation. The blockade is this present unfolding of capital's limits from the standpoint of the proletariat and expressed as immediate struggle. This was perhaps the best possible in the moment; it was not enough.

We would argue, consequentially, that the final inability of Oakland Commune to confront capital on an enlarged scale arises from, in addition to the overwhelming state force arrayed against it, a double dynamic. On the one hand there is the truth that the proletarians of Oakland are increasingly exiled from the abode of valorisation: an effect with an internal bifurcation between those who work elsewhere in the economy and those who do not work at all. On the other hand, there is the persistent moralising character which implies that every seizure from the state or from capital must have some appeal to liberal virtue: that an appropriated building must be a school or library, that a strike must receive a trade union imprimatur—as if somehow these gestures would allow for broad sympathy throughout the larger population, or might defer the blows of the batons.

Indeed, the sequence of events can't be understood without examining the moral assumptions people preserve concerning strikes and blockades. Because of the history of the worker's movement, it is commonly assumed that workers have a *right* to strike their workplace. Strikes are

legitimate because it is now widely understood that, even if workers do not *own* the means of productions, being the temporary caretakers of this property implies they rightly have some say over its disposition, while a random proletarian does not. Blockades of workplaces which do not involve the workers, on the other hand, are by the same token seen as illegitimate, which of course allows the state to respond with much greater ferocity.<sup>3</sup> In our view, these ideas about the legitimacy of the strike and the illegitimacy of the blockade are extensions of the logic of property in general. During the second port blockade, activists from Occupy Oakland sought out the legitimacy and shelter from attack which their association with the unspoken *rights* of the workers offered them, while not acknowledging in any way the dangerous preconceptions on which this legitimacy rested. This is yet another way in which class belonging—here as moral image—has become a constraint.

We return, finally, to the pivotal claim of ‘Under the Riot Gear’: that the Oakland Commune ‘almost never questioned the idea of production’. We do not think it is self-evident what it would mean ‘to expand the struggle to the labour process’, nor that this is a natural unfolding; it is a historical unfolding in a changed situation. Similarly, the claim that ‘The linking of the movement with school closures may have been another [effort toward such an expansion]’ discovers an important inflection-point in the struggle, but for the wrong reasons; in point of fact, the struggle was extended to the schools, including a fairly prolonged occupation of one venue. However, the turn to the schools did not discover there students intent on seizing the reins of their own intellectual reproduction. Contrarily, it found a coordination with parents and teachers to replace, in effect, the support withdrawn by the state apparatus and mitigate, somewhat opportunistically, against the bad press Occupy Oakland had received, by seeking out the legitimacy of parent-teacher associations and their sentimental politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, such blockades will have deleterious effects on the workers associated with the blocked site. But activists don’t treat these effects in the same way they treat the negative consequences—for potential allies—of any tactic. ‘Harming workers’ is seen as particularly unthinkable.

We believe that the ongoing disarticulation of population from productive labour will inevitably undermine the moral linkage between struggle and labour as understood in its bourgeois form, wherein it appears as natural; indeed, we understand the disclosure of 'labour power' as a historically constituted category—one in need of overcoming—to be a critical aspect of communisation. On the necessity of 'extending attacks from the heart of reproduction to the heart of production' we find only agreement. *La forme d'une ville change moins vite, hélas! que le coeur de la production!* But on the question of the structure of production today and the composition and tactical repertoire of the class that will stage such attacks, we found it necessary to add these comradely criticisms.

Research & Destroy, December 2012





N-619-D

# Without You, Not a Single Cog Turns...

The way things are today, only when people are frightened will they take to the streets; and they will come out abruptly, all at once... Then, the KKE will be enlisted to stop them.<sup>1</sup>

This impressively precise prediction was made by an old Trotskyist in a chat over coffee in 2007. In this text, we look into the overt emergence of the KKE as police,<sup>2</sup> this important event of 20 October, its meaning for the development of the class struggle in Greece and how this relates to the development of the crisis.

We begin by attempting a critical reading of the core position that criticises the KKE for ‘betraying the working class’. Those holding this opinion are also dejected that ‘we are bickering among ourselves’. Their stance gives the impression that it overlooks the KKE’s role in the class struggle in Greece. This is not an oversight, however; it is not an omission caused by a lapse of attention. What this viewpoint fails to see is determined by the essence of what it does see, by the structure of its vision and by the very core of its content. Its vision is revolution as the triumph of the working class, as the transformation of capitalist society into a society of workers, that is, the revolution as the KKE also purports to see it (with itself in place of the bosses, of course). That is why this critique accuses the KKE of ‘betrayal’ in the fight towards a *common goal*. It contends that the KKE betrays the common goal of the ‘free’ workers’

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<sup>1</sup> KKE, Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας, the Communist Party of Greece.

<sup>2</sup> It is not only their act to block protesters’ access to Amalias Av. that defines the KKE’s practice as a police practice. There is evidence that, apart from the Parliament, the KKE also guarded the Plexiglas police barrier on V. Sophias St., specifically and separately, i.e. without there being a crowd of ‘civilian’ KKE protesters behind the line of guards.



society, because, through its practice and discourse, it upholds the political form of a workers' state, as opposed to the self-management of production, and, on these grounds, this view objects to the KKE's use of the slogan, 'without you, not a single cog turns—*worker*, you can run things without the bosses'.

It may seem paradoxical at first, but it is this slogan that contains the essence of the events of 20 October. The content of this slogan expresses the KKE's side (not *only* the KKE's though, and this is very important) in the conflict that is historically produced in the current period between the practices of class struggle. A careful reading of this slogan reveals that the word *worker* is the key to the content of the revolution according to the KKE (and not only). This revolution does not abolish the worker as such, it does not abolish the proletariat, it does not abolish the 'cogs', that is, the production of value. On the contrary, it calls on workers to fight (or to align as sheep behind the shepherds, in the KKE's case) so as to carry on being workers, to carry on 'turning the cogs'. The utopian phrase 'without the bosses' means 'by your own initiative', namely with bosses who will also be workers, supposedly their own bosses, or with the 'workers' party' as the boss. Behind the opportunistic adoption of an 'anarchists' slogan' by the KKE, there is the essential point that labour continues to be a separate human activity after the revolution, and everything that entails.

The KKE's defence of the parliament and the police, in this critical moment for capital and the state, from the attacks of a section of the proletariat is entirely compatible with this slogan, even more so because such attacks against the state and property can only become possible with the support of a very large chunk of the proletariat, as it became obvious on 19 October. The defence of labour cannot take place in a historical vacuum—an ahistorical form of work (as is implied by slogans like 'we want work, not unemployment') does not exist—it is necessarily the defence of the specific form that labour has taken in the historical present. Subsequently, the revolution, according to the KKE, will be the restructuring of labour on the basis of its historically determined condition (something already done by the Bolsheviks when they gained power

in Russia, taking part in the proletarian revolution of 1917, as well as by the CNT trade unionists when they took control of the factories after the proletarian uprising in Spain in 1936). If we consider these conclusions alongside the KKE's strategy to claim an ever more important role in working class reproduction, that is, to gain strength as a reproduction mechanism of the capital relation in parallel with the State, or as a 'cog' of the State apparatus in some cases, then, in the context of the growing importance of policing for working class reproduction, it is evident why the KKE must play the role of the police.

So what of those who attacked the KKE? How is it explainable, in terms of the reasoning described above, that a section of those who attacked the red front of the police, which was blocking the way to the khaki front of the police, share a great deal with the KKE's view of the revolution? Is there a point in blaming them for fighting against the KKE over the possession of Amalias Ave. and effectively over the political leadership of the movement? There are grounds for this in part, although there is an error in the content of the question itself (the political leadership of the movement). The meaning of the 20 October events is hidden below the surface of the political dispute. The question of *why this conflict is produced, what its true content is and why this is now the central issue of class struggle in many countries around the world*,<sup>3</sup> can only be answered if one goes beyond the apparent polarity between the left and the anarchists (a polarity of prior revolutions, as '*the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living*'). To go beyond this polarity one has to focus for a moment on the content of the 'anarchist' camp, or the black bloc or whatever one wants to call it (although the difficulty in establishing a name hints towards something already). It is widely known that the subsection of 'those involved in clashes' who

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is so central in Greece that it overshadows a demonstrator's killing by police. The police used so much teargas that they managed to murder one of those who defended the working class by guarding the parliament. In many countries, mainly those in the first zone of capitalist accumulation (the most recent examples occurring in Italy and the USA), this conflict appears in the form of the polarity between riots and 'peaceful' occupations/demonstrations.

organically belong to 'militant anarchist' groupings is now very small and is becoming less and less significant as the crisis deepens. It is also known that, by now, even workers clash with the police—often without their actions being condemned by their unions (see POE-OTA)<sup>4</sup>—as well as the unemployed and even the petit bourgeois (taxi owners) who are proletarianised abruptly. Those who have, one way or another, caused the recent period's riots are NOT organized anarchists in their vast majority, while organised anarchists' influence upon them is minimal and constantly declining. They are a mixed crowd of young (and as the crisis deepens, not only young) proletarians who are precarious or unemployed, or they can be school or university students. Their practices—typically riots without specific demands, occurring both separately and within demand struggles—express the current impasse of demands, the lack of future produced by this crisis, which is a crisis of the existence of the wage and therefore of proletarian reproduction. Those who clash with the police are NOT 'revolutionaries' who do so because they have 'class consciousness'; they are agents of the practices brought on by the exclusion of proletarians from labour, by the violent pushing downwards of the middle strata, by the frenetic course of the crisis of restructured capitalism and the attempt to address it with another round of capital's attacks, which challenge the very existence of the wage. These practices also lead to a dead end, seen from the viewpoint that seeks a strategy towards the victory of the working class and the realisation of a workers' society. It is this impasse that prefigures the overcoming of these practices through the class struggle, an overcoming that will not result from their dominance over other practices but will be produced in the course of their conflictual co-existence with revindictive practices. This overcoming will only be possible at the stage when this conflict does not only reproduce the dynamic of riots that lack specified demands, but also involves taking particular measures. This conflict is produced objectively—any individual choices are overdetermined by the sweeping onslaught of the crisis. This was not then a conflict between anarchists

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<sup>4</sup> Panhellenic Federation of Workers Associations of the Local Government

and the KKE in front of parliament—this is only what is apparent. Such an understanding only serves the special interests of *politically* organised anarchists and of the KKE and their fellow travellers. There will certainly be efforts to extract political value from this by both sides of the conflict, and in the short term they might (both) appear to be successful. There will be quarrelling over who is most concerned about working class unity, with accusations against each other in almost the same terms. However, the development of the crisis accelerates, and the event of 20 October will soon look like an innocent game involving rocks, a couple of molotovs and hundreds of poles with red cloths hanging.

The conflict that, in the terms of political *fetishism*, appeared as a clash between anarchists and the KKE in front of parliament has been produced as an internal conflict of proletarian practices within the entire cycle of struggles that began after the restructuring of the '80s ('90s for Greece); it constitutes the essence of this cycle of struggles, generated and developed by contradictions that are now condensed in the current crisis. This conflict has been produced historically as the outcome of capital's accumulation, of the class struggle, and it is not a result of 'strategies', 'betrayals', 'class consciousness' and other ideologemes. The two camps rapidly created through the condensation of historical time are fluid; what seems to prefigure the revolution, *through the overcoming of its limits* today, will appear divided tomorrow; its internal contradictions, that may not seem so important today, will explode. The deepening of the crisis will lead to practices beyond those of the current 'phase of riots'. The rebels of tomorrow (and that may not be so far away) will be forced to take measures for continuing the struggle that will simultaneously be survival measures, communist measures that will affect the crux of surplus value production and will build new social relations. The contradictions of *militarism* and *sexism*, which necessarily come with riots, will explode in the camp that will challenge the very existence of value. Internal conflicts are coming, new divisions are unavoidable.

We are living in the vortex; there is nothing that can rescue us anymore. Every attempt to understand the structure of current social relations, every attempt to break free from the political conception of the

revolution, which, being a *political* one, belongs to the old world of previous revolutions, will certainly contribute to the critique of this world, which in any case trembles, is under threat, as an ensemble of social relations, of being abolished by the coming revolution.

Agents of Chaos

**Sic no. 2**

*January 2014*

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